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THE DEAD MAN LAUGHS

Mystery

CHIEF INSPECTOR BILL CROMWELL, better known perhaps as "Ironsides," is at the top of his form in Mr. Victor Gunn's new mystery thriller. In spite of his veneer of toughness there is something very human and likeable about Ironsides. Dip into this book and see what happens when Cromwell and Sergeant Johnny Lister, his cheery assistant, find the body of Sir Kenneth Parsloe lying in a ditch. There is something suggestive in the agitation of Dr. Benjamin Trumper, the strange-looking village practitioner, who tries to convince Ironsides that Sir Kenneth met his death by accident—and not by a murderous blow delivered by an escaped convict who was not only on the fatal spot at the fatal time, but who had broken gaol for the express purpose of getting his fingers round Sir Kenneth's throat. . . . This typical Victor Gunn thriller has many tense moments, but there are plenty of light touches to relieve the grim picture of tragedy and mystery—to say nothing of a climax which will make the most hardened reader sit back and do a bit of deep breathing. . . . One of Victor Gunn's extra-specials.

By the Same Author

NICE DAY FOR A MURDER	IRONSIDES SEES RED
MAD HATTER'S ROCK	DEATH'S DOORWAY
IRONSIDES' LONE HAND	IRONSIDES OF THE YARD
IRONSIDES SMASHES THROUGH	FOOTSTEPS OF DEATH

THE DEAD MAN LAUGHS

by

VICTOR GUNN



COLLINS

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To
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AND JOAN



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CHAPTER ONE

ECHO OF MURDER

"WHAT I can't understand," wheezed Inspector Catchpole, "is why they should send such an important man as yourself, Mr. Cromwell, on such a trifling mission."

"Well, it's nice to know I'm an important man," grunted Bill Cromwell dourly. "I'd bow if I could, but in this damned rat-trap it's as much as I can do to move an eyebrow."

It was an impolite, and indeed an ungracious, way of referring to Detective-Sergeant Johnny Lister's beautiful sports Alvis; for Johnny was officially off duty that afternoon, and learning that his immediate chief had to make a journey into rural Surrey he had generously offered to run him down. In Reigate they had picked up Inspector Catchpole of the Surrey Constabulary, and this latter gentleman, who bore a close resemblance to Teddy Brown, practically filled the rear seat, to say nothing of giving the springs a fit of acute melancholy and depression.

"It's not such a trifling mission as you seem to think," continued Chief Inspector Cromwell, his somewhat forbidding face clouded by a frown. "This man Hatherton is a dangerous sort of devil by all accounts, and the chief thought it would be as well for a headquarters man of some authority to go down and give Parsloe a gentle hint that he'd better be on his guard. We dragged you into it because we wanted to have somebody of local importance at the interview. Never know how to take these rural bigwigs; they sometimes resent advice, no matter how well meaning, if it's slung at them by people out of their own district. It's a hell of a thankless job, being a cop."

"What he means, my cheery old local inspector," said Johnny Lister, turning a mischievous face, "is that every job he ever gets is a pain in the neck. Just ignore him. He grumbles at everything. Didn't you hear him saying rude things about my car? And he's got the official expense money in his private pocket at this very moment."

"I'm not denying it's useful having an assistant with enough private means of his own to afford a death-dealing juggernaut like this tin buggy," said Cromwell grudgingly. "What with

the roads as slippery and treacherous as a skating rink, though, I think I'm a fool not to have taken the train."

The winter's afternoon was bitterly cold, with an ice-edged wind from the north-east carrying tiny snowflakes out of the leaden sky. In exposed places the snow was blowing about the road in eddies, like fine white powder; in less exposed places it was already beginning to lie on the frozen tarmac, and the good-looking aristocratic young sergeant needed to drive with caution.

Although the car was an open one, its weather-proofing equipment was so excellent that the interior was now as warm and cosy as that of a saloon. There was no justification whatever for "Ironsides" Cromwell's caustic remarks. Now, having filled his pipe and got it going, he eased one arm over the back of the front seat and half-turned so that he could talk to the stout Catchpole more easily.

"Remember the Easton murder case?"

"I heard about it," replied the inspector, whose vocal chords were so handicapped by fat that his voice was a perpetual wheeze. "Don't know much about it, really."

"But it was in your district. . . ."

"I wasn't here three years ago," interrupted Catchpole. "That's when Easton was murdered, wasn't it? They had me up north on special duty in the shipyards about that period."

"Well, the case was practically open and shut," said Cromwell musingly, as though talking to himself. "Warner Hope Easton, the millionaire banker, was murdered in his own office, and his young private secretary, a man named Maurice Hatherton, was found guilty and condemned to death. A pretty sordid case, on the whole. Nothing special about it, except that Hatherton's conviction turned on the evidence of a single eye-witness. All the rest of the evidence was circumstantial."

"Yes, I remember the main facts," said Catchpole, nodding. "Easton suspected that the young blighter had been systematically robbing him, didn't he?"

"Yes. Taxed him face to face and they had a dust up. A real snorter of a quarrel, with Hatherton getting thoroughly excited. Yet Easton apparently treated him very well, mainly because Hatherton comes of a good county family and he didn't want to get his people into a scandal; instead of prosecuting, and making the whole affair public, he dismissed Hatherton at a moment's notice. And that same night Easton was murdered."

"Who was this eye-witness? I seem to remember that he was some big pot in this district. . . ."

"You seem to remember right," grunted Cromwell. "We're on our way to see him now. Sir Kenneth Parsloe, Easton's partner. Only why a man of his wealth prefers to live at a place called Higham Top in the backwoods of Surrey beats me hollow. Why can't he live in London, like other respectable people?"

"I believe he's got a flat in London," wheezed Catchpole. "Higham Top isn't such a dump as you seem to think, Mr Cromwell. One of the finest estates in Surrey. Wonderful old house, too—regular show place. Not that many people ever get to see it. Since Easton's death particularly, Parsloe's done precious little entertaining, by all that I can hear. We ought to be getting near the place soon. . . . Wasn't Hatherton's death sentence commuted to penal servitude for life?"

"Yes; he appealed, of course, but when the appeal was dismissed he made a pretty bad rumpus in the dock, shouting out threats, and had to be silenced and hustled away. Swore he'd escape from gaol and have a show-down with Sir Kenneth Parsloe. You see, it was Parsloe's evidence which upset Hatherton's alibi and tipped the scales. Until Parsloe went into the witness-box there had been an even chance that the young swine would get acquitted. The circumstantial evidence was strong, but hardly strong enough to secure a conviction. Hatherton maintained that he hadn't been near his employer's office that night, but it seems that Parsloe saw him sitting hunched up in his parked car not a couple of hundred yards away from the spot—and at the vital period. Hatherton's counsel, of course, did his best to break down this evidence, maintaining that Parsloe had been mistaken, and when a verdict of 'guilty' was brought in there were lots of people who felt a bit dubious. For all I know, they feel dubious still—but they don't know what I know."

"And what's that, Mr. Cromwell?"

"Hatherton is the most violent young devil they've ever had on the Moor," replied Ironsides grimly. "Son of a good family, gentle upbringing, Varsity man. . . . In spite of that background, he's been a violent and intractable prisoner from the very first. As soon as he got there, after a short period at some other prison, he told the governor point blank that he was going to live for only one thing—and that was to escape and settle his account with Sir Kenneth Parsloe."

"Looks as if the verdict was right."

"If you can judge a man by his temperament and his actions, it certainly was," agreed the chief inspector. "Poor old Easton was killed violently—obviously in the heat of temper—and Hatherton has proved himself to be an absolute young fiend. It's a bit rough on a man like Parsloe, who did his duty fearlessly and gave his evidence in the same way. . . . He was the one hostile witness. . . . I can tell you that within six months of reaching the Moor Hatherton made a determined and daring effort to escape. A nasty piece of work, this young feller. He knocked two warders unconscious and actually managed to scale one of the walls before he was recaptured, fighting like a wild beast."

"Were the warders damaged much?"

"Young Hatherton knocked them out with his bare fist, I believe—a straight left to the jaw in each case. In his Oxford days he was a great amateur boxer." Cromwell shrugged. "Well, you can guess what happened. Solitary confinement—all privileges suspended, and so on. But did it make any difference? Not a bit! Less than a year later he made another attempt, just as daring and determined as the first. He was only recaptured by a mere fluke, and this time, in the struggle, he broke one warder's arm and knocked another warder's teeth down his throat. He seemed to be disheartened after that, and he became sullen and morose. In fact, he began to behave himself quite well, and the prison authorities came to the conclusion that he was resigned to his fate. Like my foot!" added Cromwell grimly. "He's just broken gaol again—and this time he's made a clean getaway."

"Well, it's a long way from here to Dartmoor," said Catchpole. "I daresay it's a necessary precaution for somebody to warn Sir Kenneth, but it seems to me it could have been done quite well by a lesser man than yourself, Mr. Cromwell."

"The chief thought differently, and I'm not saying he wasn't wise," said the dour Scotland Yard man. "This fellow Hatherton displayed extraordinary ingenuity in getting away, and the point is—he has completely disappeared. It's pretty certain that he succeeded in getting right out of the district."

"But the man must be crazy if he comes into Surrey," protested Catchpole. "Only a fool would go straight to Parsloe's place at Higham Top. Surely Hatherton's game will be to wait—to lie low for a week or two?"

"We don't know. He's impulsive—he's reckless—and, above all, he's dangerous," replied Cromwell. "He's the kind of a big thug who'd do anything fantastically daring. It's my

job to see Sir Kenneth Parsloe in person and impress upon him the necessity for being on his guard."

"Can I butt in?", commented Johnny Lister, at this point. "How is it that young Hatherton's escape hasn't been reported in the newspapers?"

"The prison people thought it better to keep it dark," replied Cromwell. "The chief thought so, too. The main reason, I think, was to save Parsloe from being unnecessarily alarmed. Also, it was believed at the beginning that Hatherton would soon be recaptured. Well, the blighter hasn't been recaptured."

"We're going to be welcome visitors at Higham Top," remarked Johnny Lister, with a grin. "The bearers of glad tidings! I'll bet the old boy will want to know why the hell the authorities let Hatherton loose—and he'll let out his spleen on you, Old Iron."

"So what?" said Cromwell, with another shrug. "People are always cursing at me. I'm used to it."

"I don't think Sir Kenneth will be as unreasonable as all that," said Inspector Catchpole. "It's not your fault, sir. It's not the Yard's fault, either, if it comes to that." He mused. "Difficult to guess how he'll take it. I've never met Sir Kenneth personally, but I've heard queer things about him. . . . Pots of money, lord of all he surveys sort of thing, but a bit of an eccentric. . . . Hardly ever goes anywhere, except on his own estate, and seldom has visitors. I saw him once, in Reigate. . . . Big, ungainly sort of man with a whacking great black beard and bushy eyebrows. In fact, he and old Simon Biggintree, of Topley Down, were known as the two most bearded men in all Surrey."

Ironsides nodded.

"Yes, I seem to remember something about that," he agreed. "It was a kind of joke in the district, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but that was a long time ago. Biggintree has been dead for nearly a year," said the local inspector. "Nowadays Sir Kenneth's beard hasn't a rival in the whole county. Here, hold on, sergeant," he added suddenly. "We're just coming into Higham St. Andrew. . . . Go easy at this corner. Bear left when you get opposite the village cross."

It was nearly dark now and the snow was still descending in a fine powder. The sight of a telephone box caused Bill Cromwell to pull at Johnny Lister's sleeve and tell him to stop.

"Think I'll phone through to Sir Kenneth's place and tell him that I'll be with him in a few minutes," said Cromwell.

" Might as well give him five minutes' warning, at least. Don't want to bust right in on him without any warning."

The bitter wind nearly took his breath away as he emerged from the warm interior of the car; the tiny snowflakes drove into his face like ice particles. With head bent he crossed the telephone box and entered. He had no intention of telling Sir Kenneth Parsloe the object of his forthcoming visit—but just to warn him that he was on his way. . . . As it turned out, the phone call was opportune.

" Higham Top, the residence of Sir Kenneth Parsloe," came a solid, respectful voice.

" Put me through to Sir Kenneth, please."

" I am sorry, sir; Sir Kenneth is not here."

" Not there? "

" He left not five minutes ago by car, sir; he has a dinner engagement with Dr. Trumper, of Lower Martin. If you had rung up a few minutes earlier you would have caught him. . . ."

" But I'm ringing up now," said Cromwell irritably. " Who are you? The butler, I suppose? "

" Yes, sir. Beale."

" And when do you expect Sir Kenneth to return? "

" I am afraid that is difficult to say, sir. Both Sir Kenneth and Dr. Trumper are bachelor gentlemen, and when they get together for an evening . . ."

" All right. I must see Sir Kenneth at once—and I'm talking from a phone box in Higham St. Andrew. How do I get from here to Lower Whatever-you-said? "

" Lower Martin, sir? " came the butler's voice. " It's the next village, but Sir Kenneth won't be driving through Higham St. Martin to get to Bridge House. That's Dr. Trumper's residence, sir. Your best way will be to take the right fork out of the village. You'll find a signpost. It's five or six miles to Lower Martin. . . . Have you a car, sir? "

" Yes."

" Then you ought to get to Bridge House almost as soon as Sir Kenneth." The respectful voice seemed to hesitate.

" Might I inquire, sir, as to the condition of the road? "

" Devilish tricky. Why? "

" I hope master will be all right," said Beale anxiously.

" I urged him to let Edwards drive him over in the big limousine, but he wouldn't hear of it. Are they very slippery, sir? The roads, I mean? "

" Yes, don't seem to have too much confidence in Sir

Kenneth as a driver," grunted Cromwell. "There's precious little other traffic on the roads, though, so he's not likely to come to much harm."

He hung up, grumbling, and went back to the car.

"Ought to have rung him up from the Yard, before I left," he said, as he closed the door. "A fine sort of evening to keep a blinking dinner engagement. He's over in some God-forsaken hole, called Lower Martin, five or six miles away. Know anything of a Dr. Trumper of that village, Catchpole?"

"I've heard his name, that's all," replied the inspector. "Bear right past the fork—not left as I told you a few minutes ago. Do you think it'll be all right to butt into somebody else's house like this?"

"What do you think I'm going to do—hang about until God knows when, waiting for the old boy to come home?" retorted Cromwell. "Carry on, Johnny. Hey, take it easy!" he added, as the car started off with a lurching skid. "We've had two solid months of winter and not a single snowflake—and the first time I come out into the country it's got to blow a blizzard!"

The immaculate sergeant made no comment; he was well accustomed to Ironsides' grumbling. By driving cautiously, and taking the curves slowly, he reached the village of Lower Martin without mishap.

"Look out for a bridge of some kind," said Cromwell, peering forward through the snow-speckled windscreen. "H'm! Looks like a place of the dead. If you see anybody, stop and ask the way. Bridge House is the name. . . . Doesn't that look like a bridge just ahead?"

There was a big house standing close by, and Johnny pulled up. When he made inquiries of a village youth who happened to be passing, however, he learned that Dr. Trumper's house was a mile farther on, standing well by itself beyond the village limits.

"Then why the devil call his place Bridge House?" demanded Cromwell.

This was easily answered by the fact that there was another bridge over a shallow stream just before the doctor's house was reached. It seemed to be a biggish, roomy old house with out-buildings looming like white ghosts in the rear. There was a short drive leading up to the front door from the road, and the drive gates were standing wide open.

"We're first," commented Cromwell, as he noted the unbroken carpet of snow on the drive. "That's a nuisance. This

blooming doctor will want to know who we are and what we want."

"And after we've told him," said Johnny Lister, who always looked on the bright side," he'll probably ask us in and give us a drink."

He had hardly brought the car to a standstill opposite the front door when the latter was suddenly flung wide open, and a great splash of yellow light spread itself over the snow-covered steps. A tall, loose-jointed man with a great fuzzy mop of grey hair stood in the doorway in a kind of crouching attitude, peering forward through big spectacles.

"Who is it?" he asked in a strident voice. "Who is it, I say? What do you want?"

"You Dr. Trumper, sir?" asked Cromwell, as he climbed out of the car.

"Yes, I am. What do you want?"

Dr. Benjamin Trumper was so agitated that he commenced running down the steps, either ignorant or forgetful of their treacherous condition. One foot shot from under him, he skidded wildly on the other, and he would have had a very nasty fall if Bill Cromwell had not leaped forward with surprising agility—for a man who was always complaining of his aching joints—and supported him.

"God bless my soul!" gasped the doctor. "I might have half-killed myself. Thank you, sir. I had no idea the steps were in such a dangerous condition. It's a wonder I didn't break my neck."

While he was speaking he peered inquisitively from Cromwell to the stout Catchpole, who had now succeeded in disentangling himself from the car doorway. The fact that they were strangers seemed to excite Trumper all the more.

"Well, what is it?" he asked sharply. "If you require my medical services, I regret they are not available. I have an engagement for this evening. . . ."

"That's all right, sir," interrupted Cromwell. "We're not going to bother you. We came here to see Sir Kenneth Parsloe, and we were hoping that he'd have arrived by now. . . ."

"Parsloe? How did you know Parsloe would be here?"

"His butler told me," said Cromwell, in a tired voice, and briefly explained.

"Yes, yes—of course," said Dr. Trumper. "Quite. Beale told you over the telephone? I understand. Damn Beale for being an absolute fool. I didn't want to be disturbed this

evening. What do you want to see Parsloe about? Is it important? Couldn't it wait until to-morrow?"

"If it's all the same to you, doctor, I'll see Parsloe to-night," said Cromwell, with some asperity. "You needn't worry—I shall only keep him a few minutes. My name is Cromwell, and I'm an officer of Scotland Yard."

Dr. Trumper stood as though paralysed.

"Scotland—Yard?" he repeated with curiously slow deliberation. "Did you say Scotland Yard? What, in God's name, can Scotland Yard want with my friend Parsloe?"

"Nothing for you to upset yourself about, sir," said Ironsides, regarding the doctor with thoughtful intensity. "My mission is perfectly friendly. I must apologise for disturbing you. . . ."

"No, no, not at all," interrupted Dr. Trumper hastily, as he seemed to make an effort and pull himself together. "A friendly mission? Quite." He shivered. "God bless my soul! it's still snowing, isn't it? I shall catch my death of cold standing out here. Come in, gentlemen—come in! Most remiss of me to keep you standing out here in this arctic wind. Perhaps you will let me offer you some refreshment."

Johnny Lister nudged Ironsides as they cautiously negotiated the slippery steps and stamped into the hall. They wiped their feet on the big mat, but declined to remove their overcoats. A lean and disapproving butler took possession of their hats, however, and they followed the doctor into a comfortable study where a great fire was blazing.

"Whisky, I take it, Mr. . . . ?"

"Cromwell is the name, sir—Chief Inspector Cromwell," said Ironsides, his restless eyes roving about the room—although they did so quite unobtrusively. "Inspector Catchpole and Sergeant Lister. Yes, thank you. Whisky seems to be the best kind of drink on an evening like this."

Dr. Trumper produced a well-filled decanter and a siphon. He poured liberal drinks, his tall, loose-jointed, stoop-shouldered figure bending over the glasses like some wizard of old concocting a potion. He was a striking looking man, for in addition to his queer shape and mop of grey-white hair, his face was cadaverous and yellowish, with deeply sunken eyes, each with its heavy bag beneath, like lizard skin. He was clean-shaven, and his wide mouth was very full of false teeth.

"Gentlemen, I owe you an apology," he said, after he had tossed down some neat whisky at one gulp. "I am very

worried. Perhaps you have noticed my excitement and agitation?" His eyes, piercing behind their spectacles, shifted from one of his visitors to the other, and back again. "It's rather a special night. I'm going to show Parsloe a new experiment in my laboratory—something very special, and if any hitch occurs it will be most lamentable. I have been preparing for weeks . . . He should have been here long ago. I can't understand why he hasn't arrived."

"I shouldn't worry, sir. The roads are tricky, but they're not too bad. He's taking it easy, I suppose. . . ."

"If I could be assured, Mr. Cromwell, that Parsloe was taking it easy I wouldn't be concerned in the least," interrupted the doctor. "But you don't know him. He phoned me up just before he started out. . . . I strongly advised him to stay at home, saying that I could postpone the demonstration until to-morrow. He wouldn't hear of it."

"I had a hint from Sir Kenneth's butler that the fellow wasn't comfortable about the state of the roads," said Ironsides, as he sipped his whisky. "What is all this? What's the matter with Parsloe's driving?"

"Nothing—except that he's the most reckless, thoughtless, pin-brained driver in the south of England," retorted Dr. Trumper with a glare. "I've warned him scores of times. . . . He ought to have had his licence cancelled years ago. I practically begged of him to let Edwards drive him over in the limousine, but he only laughed and told me to mind my own damned business. Can you wonder that I'm worried?"

"Well, sir, if he's been driving recklessly on these roads he'll be in a ditch by this time," said Johnny Lister. "There's only a thin carpet of snow, but it's as slippery as ice."

The doctor looked at his watch, and compared it with a fine old timepiece on the overmantel.

"He ought to have been here ten minutes ago—more," he muttered, as though to himself. "Fifteen minutes ago. . . ." He began pacing up and down. "I don't know what your business with Parsloe may be, Mr.—er—Cromwell, but couldn't it wait until to-morrow? Better still, couldn't you leave a message?"

"My instructions, sir, are to see Sir Kenneth personally."

"In that case, I must ask you to forgive me," said Dr. Trumper, in a voice of decision. "You'll have to excuse me. I'm going along the Higham St. Andrew road to look for Parsloe." He touched a bell. "Knowing him as I do, I can't

help feeling that he's met with some kind of accident. . . . Oh, Jevons," he added, as the butler came in. "Tell Gosling to bring the car round. . . ."

"No need for that at all, sir," interrupted Cromwell promptly. "My car's at the door, and you're perfectly welcome to use it. The sergeant, here, will drive you."

An expression of impatience crossed the doctor's face.

"Thank you," sir, he said with annoyance. "If you don't mind I will use my own car. I wouldn't dream of putting you to this trouble."

"No trouble at all," said Ironsides with such honeyed sweetness in his voice that Johnny Lister gave him a sharp look. "I'd like you to remember that I'm a motorist, too. If a fellow motorist is in trouble on these treacherous roads I want to lend a helping hand. Besides, the sooner I can find Sir Kenneth, the better."

Dr. Trumper paused in the doorway, and only for a moment did he hesitate.

"Very well," he said. "Shall we go?"

He was so absent-minded—or so agitated—that he completely forgot his overcoat and hat, and would have gone out into the night minus both if Jevons had not hurried forward.

"What's this—what's this? Overcoat? Damn you, Jevons, I don't need. . . . Yes, I do, though," he said, struggling into the overcoat. "Infernally cold outside, isn't it? Muffler? I won't wear a muffler, Jevons. . . ."

"You'll need it, sir," said the butler stolidly.

"Will I? Well, perhaps you're right." The doctor wrapped the muffler round his neck like a great bandage, and flung open the front door. "Dashed fellow's always fussing about me like an old woman. I abhor mufflers. They're an abomination. I'm always warning my patients about the wearing of mufflers. . . ."

"Steady, sir," said Cromwell.

The doctor was about to plunge down the steps as forcefully as he had done on the first occasion.

"Ah, yes! Slippery, eh?" he jerked. "Thanks—thanks. I'd completely forgotten." He turned his head and bellowed over his shoulder. "Jevons, why the devil don't you get somebody to sweep these blasted steps? Do you want people to break their necks?"

When they entered the car the snow was still descending in a thick, silent downpour of feathery frozen crystals. Ironsides

observed, however, a few twinkling stars to the south, indicating that the sky was clearing.

"Left, when we get out of the drive," instructed the doctor. "If you go the other way, you'll get into Lower Martin . . . Yes, this is the way. One of those beastly narrow lanes which abound in this part of the country. Don't take any notice of side turnings. Keep straight on. The road leads direct to Higham St. Andrew."

Johnny Lister, who was at the wheel again, nodded. He could feel the rear wheels slithering on the treacherous surface every time he trod on the accelerator. The car's powerful headlights sent a dazzling glare on the unbroken white carpet ahead. No other vehicle of any kind had passed along this road since the snow had fallen.

"I don't like it—I don't like it," muttered Dr. Trumper tensely.

"Well, anyway, sir, there's precious little traffic," said Cromwell. "Sir Kenneth isn't likely to have had a collision with a bus or a lorry. He's probably had a perfectly ordinary skid into a ditch, and is stranded. In that case, he'll be glad to see us. . . . Whoa! Hold her, Johnny!"

"Yes, for God's sake!" said the doctor hoarsely.

The car had skidded alarmingly at the top of a slight hill, and a less skilful driver than Johnny Lister might have lost control. But he reached the bottom of the dip in safety, and at exactly the right moment he accelerated, taking the opposite rise at speed. If he had attempted a slow ascent the driving wheels would simply have churned round uselessly.

There was a level stretch of road ahead, and Ironsides noticed that the hedges, which had previously been high and untidy, were now low and neatly trimmed. He also noticed that the snow had ceased falling. . . .

"Hallo! What's this?" said Johnny suddenly.

Cromwell needed no telling. A fawn-coloured open car, minus any kind of hood, was half in and half out of the ditch on the right-hand side of the road. One headlamp, still burning, was sending its light downwards into the ditch.

"Yes—yes, I was afraid of it!" panted Dr. Trumper wildly. "That's Parsloe's Wolseley. . . . I knew it! What a fool the man is! No good talking to him. . . . He's probably hurt himself badly."

Johnny slowed down cautiously, and the scene of the accident was revealed in vivid detail in the light of the Alvis's headlamps. Johnny noted the deep, broad skidmarks on

the snowy road—marks which clearly proved that the Wolseley tourer had suffered a very nasty skid before piling into the ditch. . . . Another thing Johnny noticed was the black shape, lightly covered by powdery snow, in the ditch itself. . . .

"Nobody in the car," said Dr. Trumper, in a crackling voice, as he jumped out. "Thank God for that. He probably walked back. . . ."

"No, sir, he didn't walk back," said Ironsides gruffly.

He pointed to the grotesque figure that sprawled half in the ditch and half on the frozen bank. Both Cromwell and the doctor reached the figure at the same moment. . . .

There was bright red mixed with the snowy-white. . . . Sir Kenneth Parsloe was stiff and cold in death.

CHAPTER TWO

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW

"NASTY," commented Chief Inspector Cromwell.

"Dead?" wheezed Catchpole, from the rear.

"As cold mutton," said Ironsides.

"Poor Parsloe! Must you use such crude terms?" Dr. Trumper glared at Cromwell with complete antagonism. "This man was my best friend . . . he lies here, dead. . . ."

"Sorry, sir," grunted Cromwell. "No offence meant."

The doctor roughly elbowed his way forward and in a moment his manner changed. Bending over the body he became extraordinarily gentle. His long delicate fingers lightly touched the dead man's head and slithered through the ruffled hair.

"Good God! The front of the skull is cracked in like an egg-shell," muttered Trumper huskily. "He must have been lying here, stone dead, for over half an hour. Death was instantaneous."

"So I gathered," nodded Cromwell. "When the car hit the ditch he must have been flung clean out and he hit the bank head on. And the bank is frozen as hard as concrete." He glanced back. "You can see by the skidmarks that he lost control of the car."

"But why lose control?" asked Johnny Lister shrewdly, "on a perfectly straight stretch of level road? There was no

other traffic—the unbroken snow proves that—so, he didn't tread on the brake to avoid a collision. Queer."

"Very queer," murmured Cromwell, nodding.

"The folly of it!" said Dr. Trumper fiercely. "The absolute criminal idiocy of it! I warned him—I distinctly warned him that the roads were treacherous. I begged him to drive carefully. And the reckless fool . . ."

He broke off as though choking. He was very deeply affected by the tragedy. Bill Cromwell, who was a practical man, and who had no time for sentiment, produced an electric torch which bore a close resemblance to a young searchlight, and he directed the powerful white beam on the body—which, until now, had been half hidden in the shadows.

"Is this necessary?" asked the doctor coldly. "There is nothing you can do. Poor Parsloe is quite dead."

"So I notice, sir—frozen stiff," said Ironsides, as he laid a hand on the icy cold, rigid body. "The car doesn't seem to be much damaged," he added inconsequently. "H'm! The crash doesn't seem to have been violent enough. . . ."

He broke off without completing his sentence. Johnny noticed that he had suddenly become very alert. His gaze was darting here, there and everywhere. He continued his examination with meticulous thoroughness. His face remained expressionless, but at the back of his eyes there was a new light—a light of keen interest.

"I shan't get this picture out of my mind for some time," he said suddenly. "Parsloe was a striking looking man."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Dr. Trumper. "Unmistakable. God, what a terrible business! I feel so . . . helpless. My best friend, sir. . . . An hour ago he was hale and hearty in the robust strength of a sound and healthy man. And now . . ."

He frowned. Cromwell was still playing his torchlight directly upon the dead man. It was perfectly true that Sir Kenneth Parsloe had been of striking appearance. Although his black hair was trimmed in a normal way, the lower part of his face was covered by a full black beard—that kind of beard which is seldom seen nowadays, except on the faces of religious cranks or elderly retired fishermen. The moustache was heavy in proportion. He had been dressed in thick tweed plus-fours, with a check overcoat on top.

"Confound it, Mr. Cromwell, must you keep that light on poor Parsloe's face?" demanded the doctor, in a sudden outburst of irritation. "Have you no decency?"

"I've got a job to do, sir," retorted Ironsides curtly. "I'm trying to find out the cause of death. . . ."

"Damn your impudence, sir!" shouted Trumper, in his loud voice. "I have already told you the cause of death. My friend was killed by accidentally striking his head against the ground when he was flung out of the car. The cause of death is obvious. By what right do you, a police officer, question my professional opinion?"

"Keep your hair on, sir. . . ."

"I'll trouble you to keep my hair out of the conversation," roared the doctor, who, bare-headed, presented a striking sight with his mop of fuzzy white hair waving about in the bitter wind. "Unless you are very careful, my friend, I shall make a serious complaint to Scotland Yard. . . ."

"That's all right, sir," said Cromwell, in a tired voice. "Make all the complaints you like, but, as I said before, I've got a job to do. At least, Inspector Catchpole has. This thing has happened in his district, and he's officially in charge."

"Yes, yes, I suppose I am," puffed Catchpole, with a start.

Cromwell took no further notice of the doctor. He continued his careful examination—even instructing Johnny Lister to help him turn the body over. This was no easy task, for it was frozen stiff and was difficult to move. Very little blood had flowed, for there were no serious external wounds. Death had apparently come instantaneously from the crushed skull, the frontal bone of which was badly battered.

"Huh!" grunted Cromwell, between tight lips.

He lost interest in the body. Moving away from the car, he directed his torchlight into the shallow ditch—and beyond, to a spot where there was a gap in the hedge. Finally, taking his puzzled assistant with him, he forced his way through the gap.

Dr. Trumper, who had been watching these proceedings with strong disfavour, turned on the stout Catchpole.

"What the devil's the matter with your friend?" he demanded tartly. "Here we have a perfectly clear case of accidental death, and this fool of a man makes as much fuss as though there were some mystery. . . ." He paused, and looked at Catchpole intently. "By the way, what was it you wanted to see Parsloe about?"

"It's too late now, anyway," wheezed the inspector. "Sir Kenneth is beyond Hatherton's reach. . . ."

"Beyond Hatherton's . . . ! What name did you say?"

"Hatherton—Maurice Hatherton."

"You mean Hatherton, the murderer?"

"Yes, sir."

"But, damn it, man, Hatherton has been in prison for the past three years, serving a life sentence. . . ."

"He escaped yesterday," said Catchpole heavily.

"Good God! Then . . . then you think . . . I see," said the doctor, with sudden enlightenment. "Your object in visiting Parsloe was to warn him?"

"That's right, sir," said Catchpole. "Our people thought the matter was too delicate to be handled over the telephone. That's why they sent an important man like the chief inspector from the Yard. I expect you know that Sir Kenneth's evidence at Hatherton's trial, turned the scale. No harm in telling you, sir, that Hatherton has been a truculent and dangerous prisoner. From the very first he swore that he would be revenged on Parsloe, and he has made two previous attempts to escape."

Dr. Trumper nodded understandingly.

"I've heard rumours, of course," he said, in a shocked voice. "More than once poor Parsloe talked to me on the subject . . . Not that he was nervous in any way. What a tragic coincidence that Parsloe should accidentally kill himself at the very time of Hatherton's gaol break. . . ." He paused, and looked at the fat inspector very hard. "This begins to look very queer. Have you any reason to suppose that this wretched man, Hatherton, is anywhere in the district?"

"No reason at all," replied Catchpole promptly. "We don't know where he is. We only know that he succeeded in slipping past the Dartmoor cordons. . . . He might be anywhere in the country. It's my personal opinion that he's still hiding in some moorland cave, half starved, like a trapped animal. . . ."

"Catchpole!" came a hail. "Just a minute."

"Excuse me, sir," said the inspector.

He made his way gingerly across the frozen ditch and forced his way through the gap in the hedge, leaving Dr. Trumper more irritable and exasperated than ever. He found Bill Cromwell and John Lister on the edge of the meadow which bordered the road. The meadow itself stretched out like a white blanket.

"What do you make of these, Catchpole?" said Ironsides abruptly. "And listen—don't be too sure that Parsloe was killed by accident."

"For the love of Pete! You don't mean . . . ?"

"I mean that he might have been murdered," said Cromwell grimly. "Take a look at these."

He switched on his electric torch with dramatic suddenness, and threw the beam upon the white carpet of snow. Catchpole jumped. Leading straight away from the spot was a clear trail of footprints. Each footprint was clear-cut and crisp, and the trail must have been made since the snow had ceased falling—which limited the time to about a quarter of an hour.

"Well, I'm damned!" ejaculated Catchpole, in a startled voice. "There must have been somebody here only a minute or two before we drove up."

"It's my guess he was here *when* we drove up," said Cromwell. "He was in a bit of a mess. He couldn't get away by road without showing himself, so he broke through the hedge and streaked across this meadow."

"Then why didn't we see him?"

"For one thing, he was hidden by the hedge—and for another, we were giving all our attention to the ditched car and the dead body. We heard nothing because the man's footfalls were deadened by the snow. Looks to me, inspector, as though we arrived a shade too late."

"You don't mean . . . Hatherton?"

"Who else?" said Ironsides grimly. "Hatherton got here first, jumped out into the road and caused Parsloe to skid into the ditch. . . . However, we can go into that later. The immediate thing to do is to follow this trail."

"Will you kindly inform me," came an impatient shout from the other side of the hedge, "what the devil you're doing over there?"

"Shan't be long, doctor," sang out Cromwell. "Stay by the car, if you don't mind." He lowered his voice. "Come on! We don't want that old busybody with us."

Leaving the puzzled and indignant Dr. Trumper to guard the body, the other three hurried at the double across the snowy meadow. At least, the Scotland Yard pair hurried at the double; the corpulent Catchpole was soon left behind, puffing and blowing like a wheezy steam engine. There was no need for Ironsides to use his torch, for the sky had cleared and the stars were shining like twinkling diamonds in the velvet winter's sky. The trail across the unbroken snow was clearly visible.

It was highly important to follow this trail without a moment's delay. Somebody—at present unknown—had been at the scene of the accident—or crime—and that somebody

had hared across the meadow at the approach of Cromwell's car. The very fact that he had bolted was grimly significant. If the man's conscience was clear, why had he not waited until the car had come up?

"Here, I say!" ejaculated Johnny Lister. "I've just spotted something, Old Iron. This is a double trail!"

"Of course it's a double trail, you poor fish," retorted Ironsides sourly. "How else do you think the man got across the meadow? But here's the point—when he was making the outward trip it was snowing—and snowing pretty hard. When he went back it had stopped snowing. That's why the inward trail is half obliterated by fallen snow, and the outward trail is clear cut. It means that he must have waited at the spot where the car crashed for some appreciable time."

"Yes, and he's been watching us since," whispered Johnny. "Don't look now, Old Iron, but there's something moving on the other side of that fence, to the left."

He spoke the last words in a tense whisper. Cromwell, without making any reply, swerved adroitly and forged ahead. He amazed the athletic sergeant with his display of speed and agility. The fence was not very high, admittedly, but the chief inspector took it practically in his stride, like a hurdler. He found himself in a smaller meadow; an oblong strip of grass bordered by fences and hedges. A dark figure was running across the narrowest part of the open space, making straight for the opposite hedge.

The fugitive seemed to be hampered by a lame foot, for as he ran he limped; and his gait was so unsteady that the trail of footprints was drunken in appearance. He reached the hedge just ahead of Ironsides, and threw a glance over his shoulder. Then, realising that the pursuers were right upon his heels, he plunged straight through the hedge with a rending of twigs and small branches. Obviously, he had been lurking behind that other hedge, watching the distant proceedings in the road, and it was impossible that he should know that the pair on his trail were connected with the police.

And he was running . . . a sure proof that he had no wish to be associated with the death of Sir Kenneth Parsloe.

Cromwell, sensing that the hedge was full of prickles, took advantage of a gasp he had heard from the fugitive, and went through the hedge backwards—a manœuvre made all the easier by the fact that a gap had been provided for him. He was thinking, in that tense moment, that the man he was chasing was probably a perfectly innocent and thoroughly

frightened local rustic, whose only thought was to get into the next county.

However, as Cromwell recovered his balance after plunging through the gap, he switched on his powerful electric torch and focused the beam on the unknown—who remained unknown no longer, for at that very second he was unwise enough to turn his head, revealing a grimy haggard face with a stubble of beard on the chin.

"Hatherton!" rapped out Cromwell.

So the whole affair was as ugly as he had feared. . . . He had seen Hatherton's photograph several times, and knew that he was not mistaken. Maurice Hatherton, upon hearing that shout, ran like one possessed.

"Hatherton, you fool!" roared Cromwell. "This won't do you any good. You're through."

Hatherton did not agree.—and, as it turned out, he had a good reason for not agreeing. On this side of the broken hedge he was in a narrow country lane and a few seconds after he had streaked round a bend, Cromwell heard the noisy din of a motor-cycle engine as the kick starter was operated.

"Hell's bells!" swore the chief inspector. "He's getting away, Johnny."

They both swung round the bend together, just in time to see the man on the motor-cycle careering off, the machine slithering and sliding perilously on the treacherous road. Once, indeed, it seemed inevitable that Hatherton would crash; but by some miracle he regained control and went tearing down the lane.

"A fat lot of good you've turned out to be!" snapped Ironsides, as he glared helplessly at Johnny Lister. "Here am I, an old man, outstripping you from the start. If you had had an ounce of go in you, instead of being asleep on your feet, you'd have overtaken him before he got on that cursed bike!"

"You do yourself an injustice, Old Iron," panted Johnny. "I wasn't asleep on my feet, and you know it. And don't ever talk to me again about your rheumatics, or your floating kidneys. You old fraud, you could beat Wooderson's record any day you liked. Honestly, Ironsides, I didn't know you had it in you."

"Bah!" said Ironsides caustically.

He was annoyed. He knew the futility of giving chase on foot—and there was no other method. He stood there, the breath coming out of him in steamy clouds in the crisp air,

and he could still hear the motor-cycle's exhaust as the machine receded farther and farther into the distance.

"What happened?" inquired a wheezy, exhausted voice.

Inspector Catchpole had caught up with them; and Cromwell briefly explained.

"Hatherton, eh?" ejaculated the stout inspector, with a whistle. "I say, then it *was* murder!" It was Hatherton who got the old boy. There's going to be a hell of a row over this, Mr. Cromwell. . . . I mean, you being too late to warn Sir Kenneth of his danger. . . ."

"If there's any hell of a row, it's not going to fall on my head," interrupted Cromwell promptly. "All I did was to obey orders, and I'm not taking any blame." He was giving the immediate countryside a keen inspection. "Yes, I thought so; this lane runs almost parallel with the other road, divided by a couple of meadows. . . . We'd better get back to the car as quickly as we can, and then shoot off to the nearest telephone. Hatherton won't get far if we spread the net quickly enough."

They commenced retracing their steps.

"If the fellow had a motor-bike, why the devil did he hang about?" asked Catchpole. "According to what you say, Mr. Cromwell, he must have been hiding behind one of these hedges for some minutes. Why do that? Why didn't he bolt while he had the chance?"

Ironsides replied in a tired voice, as though he took a poor view of the inspector's intelligence:

"Have you ever started up a motor-cycle engine in a country lane on a quiet night?" he retorted. "The young blighter was afraid to start the bike—knowing that the sound would attract our attention. He was waiting behind the hedge, hoping that we'd clear off without spotting his tracks in the meadow. Now he's in the soup. He's on the run again, and we've got a clue as to his means of transport. Ten to one he'll ditch that motor-bike within a few miles."

"You're sure, sir?" puffed Catchpole. "I mean, you're sure it was Hatherton?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure," replied Ironsides. "And I'll tell you something else. When he broke through the hedge he tore his clothes and scratched himself about the face—probably badly. That ought to help."

"The blinking young fool!" said Catchpole. "He escapes the gallows once, and he's not satisfied. He won't get off a second time. I thought there was something funny about the

way Sir Kenneth's skull was cracked in. This young swine did it, of course."

"Just a minute."

Cromwell retraced his steps to the torn hedge, and he gave the broken twigs and branches a careful inspection by the light of his powerful torch.

"Thought so," he grunted. "Blood . . . scraps of wool . . . yes, he must have scratched his face deeply. Dark brownish overcoat . . . rubber-soled shoes with circular rubber heels. We shall be able to put out quite a good description."

When they reached the road Dr. Benjamin Trumper was practically dancing with impatience and anger.

"Where have you been?" he demanded hotly. "What in the name of God have you been doing? If this is a sample of Scotland Yard methods I hope to heaven I shall never need police assistance. What was the idea of rushing madly across that meadow, and leaving me stranded? Don't you realise there's a dead man in this ditch?"

"Yes, sir, but . . ."

"And that motor-cycle?" fussed the doctor. "What was that sound of a motor-cycle I heard?"

"The motor-cycle," replied Ironsides grimly, "was ridden by Maurice Hatherton, convicted murderer and escaped convict. If my assistant, here, had a couple of decent legs, instead of two sticks of gelatine, we should have nabbed him."

"Hatherton!" said Dr. Trumper, standing very still. "Are you telling me that that young hound was actually here, on this very spot?"

"That, sir, is what I'm telling you."

"But it's impossible. . . . It's unbelievable. . . ."

He paused and Cromwell eyed him steadily.

"Impossible, sir? Why do you say that?" he asked in a gentle voice. "It was Hatherton's one aim in life, amounting to an obsession, to get his hands on Sir Kenneth Parsloe."

"Yes, yes, I know. But how could Hatherton have known that Parsloe would be motoring from Higham Top to Lower Martin?" asked the doctor, not unreasonably? "It is sheer nonsense to assume that Hatherton could have been waiting on the road, expecting Parsloe to pass. He couldn't possibly have known anything of Parsloe's intended movements."

Cromwell shrugged.

"Well, anyway, sir, Hatherton was here—and that's a fact we've got to face," he replied. "I'm going to spread the net

for him. . . . By the way, do you happen to know where is the nearest telephone ? ”

“ Off-hand, I should say Parsloe’s own place. . . . But look here, Mr. Cromwell. You’re not going to run off again, are you ? We’ve got to get poor Parsloe back . . . ”

“ All right. It won’t take us many minutes longer, and I can phone as soon as we get there,” said the chief inspector. “ The sooner we get hold of Hatherton, the better. I think he’s going to have a lot of explaining to do.”

“ Nothing of the sort,” said Dr. Trumper wrathfully. “ What nonsense are you thinking now, inspector ? Hatherton’s presence here to-night is nothing more than a coincidence. But we’re wasting time. Will somebody be good enough to help me with my poor friend ? And after we have got him to Higham Top, I hope you will have the decency to go about your own business.”

“ Well, it’s likely enough that you’ll be rid of me, doctor—and Sergeant Lister, too,” said Ironsides shortly. “ But there’ll have to be police inquiries. . . . ”

“ Police inquiries ? In God’s name, why ? ” burst out the other excitedly. “ I tell you Hatherton’s presence was a coincidence. Where’s your common sense ? Parsloe was killed accidentally. Don’t you think I know ? ” He became more excited still. “ Am I a doctor, or am I not a doctor ? Parsloe’s car skidded into the ditch, he was thrown out, and he suffered such severe head injuries that he was killed instantaneously. That, in simple language, is the long and short of it.”

“ All right, sir—no need to get hot under the collar,” said Cromwell mildly. “ I daresay you’re right. On the other hand, we can’t overlook the possibility that Sir Kenneth Parsloe was murdered.”

“ Pah ! Fantastic nonsense ! ” stormed the doctor.

“ Hatherton was here . . . ”

“ Hatherton—Hatherton ! You keep harping on Hatherton ! ” roared Trumper. “ Hatherton escaped from prison—yes. He had a grudge against Parsloe—yes. But if you’re going to tell me that Hatherton killed Parsloe . . . ”

“ I’m not going to tell you anything of the sort, sir,” interrupted the chief inspector. “ I’m not going to argue, either. And who’s wasting time now ? ”

“ Upon my soul ! You dare to use that tone . . . ”

“ Take it easy, sir. All this excitement has upset you. You’re unnerved. Let’s get on with the job.”

He turned to Johnny Lister and Catchpole, and without

waiting for Dr. Trumper to lend any assistance, the three of them carefully lifted the stark corpse and carried it to the Alvis. After the first few moments, Trumper seemed to come out of a kind of daze, and fussed about like an old woman.

"I shall have to leave you here, Mr. Catchpole," said Ironsides, when everything was ready. "Don't let anybody get within arm's length of this disabled car. It hasn't got to be touched until we've had a chance of giving it a thorough going over. And if any other traffic comes along—which doesn't seem likely—see that it keeps clear of these skid marks."

"All right; leave that to me," replied Catchpole. "Perhaps you'll phone through to the Higham St. Andrew police station and shoot Sergeant Root—he's the man in charge—out here as soon as he can get off."

Cromwell promised, and a minute later the Alvis started off with its tragic burden. Johnny Lister was not too pleased to be the dead man's companion in the back seat. In the front seat, Dr. Trumper sat beside Cromwell as though the leather cushions had become red hot. He was restless and jumpy, and kept making little tentative clutches at the driving wheel as though he expected Cromwell to send the car into the ditch any minute.

"Perhaps there's another telephone—a nearer telephone," he muttered. "Yes, now I come to think of it, the post office . . ."

"Sorry, sir; but we're booked for Higham Top now, and it's too late to make any change."

"Well, I hope you won't turn this tragic house into a headquarters for your preposterous investigation," snapped Dr. Trumper. "Why *any* investigation?" he demanded, getting excited again. "Here we have a plain case of accidental death . . ."

"Even cases of accidental death have to be investigated, sir," said Ironsides curtly. "Don't worry. I won't cause more upset than I can help."

He was rapidly getting fed up to the eye teeth with Dr. Trumper, and he was beginning to wonder if he had been wise in acceding to the other's request for the dead man to be taken home. It might have been better, on the whole, to leave the body in the ditch until a more thorough examination could be made. . . . However, Catchpole was on the spot, and he would see that nobody interfered. And it was highly important,

indeed, that Cromwell should get to a telephone as quickly as possible.

He wondered how he was going to deal with the excitable doctor. It was not the first time that his investigations had been hampered by a well-meaning but irritating country practitioner.

Dr. Trumper talked a good deal during that short drive, and Ironsides listened with only an occasional grunt in reply. The root of the doctor's fears seemed to be that his old friend's name would be dragged into a sensational criminal case—whereas, as he pointed out for the hundredth time, Sir Kenneth's death had been purely accidental.

When they reached Higham Top, Ironsides was given a glimpse in the starlight of a fine old Elizabethan mansion with half-timbered walls. The house stood in its own grounds, well off the road, with stately chestnuts dividing the gardens from the parkland. Higham Top was, in fact, one of the most charming houses in Surrey, with beautifully kept grounds. One or two lights were glowing in the windows; and lights too, were gleaming through the glass of the double front doors. One of these doors opened as the car stopped, and the bishop-like figure of Beale, the butler, was revealed in the warm glow.

"I heard the car, sir," said Beale, blinking, and shading his eyes—for, coming out of the lighted house, the night seemed to him intensely black. "I was half expecting you back. . . . I beg your pardon!" added Beale, with a start. "I thought, for a moment, that Sir Kenneth had returned. . . ."

"Alas, Beale, you are quite right," said Dr. Trumper, in a tragic voice. "Your master has returned."

Beale so far forgot his dignity as to run down the steps.

"Dr. Trumper! Is anything wrong, sir? Has the master met with an accident?"

"Your master, my poor fellow, is dead."

"Dead, sir!" said Beale dully.

"Accidentally killed through the folly of his own reckless driving," said the doctor. "A bad business, Beale. This is a terrible blow for all of us. . . . Steady man! Was I too abrupt?"

Beale stood there trembling like a leaf, his face, ruddy a moment before, now a mottled and sickly grey. The doctor had certainly not been very diplomatic in his manner of breaking the tragic news.

The frozen body was carried into the house. And under Dr. Trumper's directions taken to Sir Kenneth's own bedroom. In a very short time the news had spread to the other

servants, and sobbing, half-hysterical women appeared in the back part of the hall, watching the grim procession as it made its way up the wide staircase to the upper hall.

"Now, sir—that phone," said Cromwell briskly, as soon as the body had been laid on the bed.

"Be good enough, sir, to lower your voice!" whispered the doctor severely. "You appear to forget that you are in the presence of the dead."

Only the presence of the dead prevented Ironsides from telling Dr. Trumper, in caustic and uncouth words, exactly what he thought of him. Clamping his mouth shut like a trap, the chief inspector stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER THREE

WINDFALL FOR TWO

CROMWELL found the telephone in the mellow old library, where a dying fire was still glowing in the big grate. Within a minute, Ironsides was busy. His first task was to get through to the Reigate police—with instructions to spread a dragnet for Maurice Hatherton. He gave the escaped convict's description, and added that the man was probably suffering from facial injuries.

He got through to Scotland Yard, too, and made a brief report. He phoned Sergeant Root, of Higham St. Andrew, and told that worthy man to get to the scene of the car smash with as little delay as possible.

He made other phone calls, too. . . .

By the time he had finished Dr. Trumper and Johnny Lister entered the room. The former was now in a calm, sombre mood—but only on the surface. Inwardly, Ironsides could tell, the man was still suffering from some great agitation.

"Well, I've done all I can for the moment," said Cromwell, as he went across to the fireplace and kicked the dying embers into a blaze. "That's better. Can't stay here for long, though. I've got to get back to Catchpole. . . ."

"Yes and I hope that you'll make some arrangement to have Parsloe's car brought back here," said Dr. Trumper. "Now, really, Mr. Cromwell, there's no need for a lot of red tape just because young Hatherton happened to be near the spot at the time of the crash. I am—or was—Parsloe's medical

attendant, and I shall have no hesitation in signing a death certificate. . . ."

"If you don't mind, sir, we'll leave all that until a bit later," interrupted Ironsides gruffly. "There's a good deal to be done before we can talk of death certificates."

"I don't see it," said the doctor, getting excited again.

"I don't see it at all. What, pray, is to be done? I have told you over and over again that . . ." He broke off irritably as the door opened. "Well, Beale, what is it?"

The butler, who was standing in the doorway, had apparently made a good recovery. A little colour had returned to his face, and he was his old dignified self.

"I have taken the liberty, sir, of setting out a light supper in the morning-room," he said. "I thought perhaps the gentlemen would be in need of some refreshment."

"Well, really . . . I hardly think . . ."

"I am sure the master would have desired me to offer some such hospitality, sir."

"And all credit to you, Beale, old boy, for a ripe, brainy thought," said Johnny Lister heartily. "A light supper, including the right kind of liquid refreshment, is just what we need."

"Yes, thank you, Beale," added Cromwell. "Very thoughtful of you. We accept gladly."

After that, of course, Dr. Trumper found it difficult to raise any objection—as he had seemed to be on the point of doing at the outset. He made a poor attempt to stifle his annoyance, and turned away with compressed lips.

They went across the hall and entered a smallish, comfortable room where an excellent cold supper was ready. A fire was burning and the lights were bright. The room was cheery and filled with the appetising smell of hot coffee.

After a moment or two of hesitation Dr. Trumper left the room, making some muttered remark to the effect that he wanted to have a few words with Beale.

"Glad he's gone, Johnny," said Bill Cromwell, as the door closed. "The old blighter is getting to be a nuisance. What do you make of his tantrums?"

"Make of 'em?" said the sergeant, as he helped himself to a tongue sandwich. "I don't quite know what you mean. The old boy is worried and upset. He and Parsloe were lifelong friends, weren't they? You know what it is, when two middle-aged bachelors get thick, with the same kind of interests. He doesn't want to believe that Parsloe was murdered. The very

"Thanks. Johnny, when we go out, you'd better get some rooms for us at the Green Dragon . . ."

"Rooms? Are you staying, then?" asked the doctor sharply.

"Got to stay, sir. Orders."

"I really don't see . . ."

"Inspector Catchpole, of course, is officially in charge of the case," continued Ironsides complacently; "but my people at H.Q. think I'd better stay on the spot until we hear more of Hatherton. And even we policemen have to sleep somewhere."

Johnny Lister speculated as to whether the wily Cromwell had really received orders from headquarters to stay on the job, or whether he was making up a pretty fairy tale for Dr. Trumper's benefit. Ironsides did not care two hoots about official regulations, and he was such an efficient officer that his superiors were apt to wink at his irregularities.

It seemed to Johnny, too, that the chief inspector was deliberately killing time—and he was such an energetic man by nature that there must be some ulterior object in this performance. The impression he was giving Dr. Trumper, however, was that his methods were open to severe criticism, and that he thought more of his stomach than his job.

At length, after another look at his watch, he reluctantly prepared to depart.

"Ready, sergeant?" he said gruffly. "We'd better go and contact Catchpole. . . . Hallo! What's that I can hear?" he added, cocking his head on one side. "A car?"

"Yes, yes, a car—they have brought poor Parsloe's car back," said Dr. Trumper eagerly.

"No, sir. I think not. I told Catchpole to leave the car where it was. This is some other car."

At that moment they heard a bell jangling distantly in the far recesses of the old house. Johnny Lister was looking at Ironsides—hard. For it had suddenly struck the sergeant that his immediate chief had been deliberately hanging out the time. At all events, he seemed in no way surprised to hear the arrival of a strange car. It almost seemed that he had been expecting it.

A tap on the door was followed by Beale.

"It's Mr. Dinglewell, sir," he said, addressing himself to Dr. Trumper. "There's another man with him . . ."

"Dinglewell!" ejaculated the doctor, in astonishment. "What's he doing here at this time of night?"

"He did not inform me, sir."

"It's not so late," remarked Cromwell. "Only a little past mid-evening, in fact. Who's Dinglewell?"

"Who's Dinglewell?" repeated the doctor, who was still looking startled. "Parsloe's lawyer. Lives in Guildford. Good God! Bad news travels fast, indeed! What's the matter with you, Beale? Why didn't you bring Mr. Dinglewell straight in?"

"Yes, sir," said the butler, retiring.

"Yes, he must have heard of the tragedy," said Trumper, as though talking to himself. "He certainly had no appointment with Parsloe this evening. . . . Ah, Dinglewell!"

The door had opened and a bluff, biggish, kindly-featured elderly man had entered. The very first look at his face assured those present that the lawyer was acquainted with the bad news. He was followed into the room by Inspector Catchpole.

"I left Root in charge, sir," said the latter, in an aside to Cromwell. "Mr. Dinglewell was passing, and I thought I'd come along with him. Any news of Hatherton?"

"None."

"This is a terrible business, Dr. Trumper," said the lawyer, as he shook hands and glanced inquiringly at Cromwell and Johnny. "Not that I am surprised. Parsloe's recklessness . . ."

Dr. Trumper introduced the Scotland Yard pair.

"Indeed?" said Mr. Dinglewell, in some surprise. "Even in this backwater of Surrey, Mr. Cromwell, I have heard of your exploits. One of the Big Five, aren't you? Surely Sir Kenneth's accidental death does not warrant the employment of important men from Scotland Yard?"

"No, no—of course not," put in the doctor quickly. "Mr. Cromwell is here for quite another reason. That infernal convict fellow, Hatherton—the young devil who murdered Easton—has escaped from prison and he's somewhere in this district. But, tell me, Dinglewell—how did you know that poor Parsloe was dead?"

"As a matter of fact, I got to know by the merest chance," replied the lawyer, as he carefully placed a leather satchel on the table and sat down. "I was in my club this evening and one of the chief officers of the police force happened to get in conversation with me; and while talking about this man hunt for Hatherton, he mentioned that Parsloe had been accidentally killed in a road crash. I thought I'd better come out here as quickly as I could."

What Mr. Dinglewell did not know was that Cromwell, having ascertained the name and address of Sir Kenneth Parsloe's lawyer from Beale, had rung up the Guildford police, and had asked them to locate Mr. Dinglewell and drop him a hint in a casual sort of way about the tragedy. Cromwell had been quite certain that the lawyer would come shooting out to Higham Top. Even Johnny Lister did not guess the exact truth—although he had wondered at Beale's slightly raised eyebrows when Cromwell had asked "who's Dinglewell?"

The grave-faced lawyer listened with some impatience to Dr. Trumper's long-winded story of the accident, and Trumper's further explanation that he and Parsloe had been intending to conduct a scientific experiment at Bridge House.

"Parsloe was very interested in that sort of thing," said the doctor. "And you are perfectly aware, Dinglewell, that although I have a medical practice in Lower Martin, I have other interests as well. Lack of funds will not permit me to conduct the ambitious experiments I should like, but . . ."

"Yes, yes, doctor, of course," interrupted Mr. Dinglewell hastily. "I am quite sure that your scientific work will eventually prove of great benefit to the medical profession. What I am wondering at the moment, however, is why in the name of mystery Parsloe was driving through a snowstorm in an *open* car. Surely the man had enough sense to fix the hood and side curtains? If he had done that he would not have been thrown out and his life might have been spared."

Dr. Trumper shrugged.

"I think you know Parsloe as well as I do—stubborn, pigheaded, wilful——" he growled. "Do you think I haven't protested with him about driving in an open car? He never raised the hood unless rain was pouring in torrents. He wouldn't take any notice of a little snow. There's a fine Humber saloon in the garage, and a chauffeur idling his time away in the kitchen—but Parsloe had to drive on these treacherous roads in an open car!"

"Yes, it is certainly tragic," said Mr. Dinglewell, shaking his head. "Peculiar, the man's preference for an open car in this weather. He wasn't always like that . . ." He broke off abruptly. "But what were you saying about a convict?"

"You might as well know, sir, that I'm not entirely satisfied that Sir Kenneth Parsloe died as the result of an accident," broke in Cromwell before the doctor could reply. "It might have been murder."

"Good heavens!"

"Yes, sir, I mean it. Might just as well let you have it straight. Hatherton's presence on the spot can't be ignored. The fellow has broken gaol three times, and ever since his conviction he has been obsessed by the determination to get at the man whose evidence resulted in his conviction. That man was Parsloe. Hatherton was actually on the scene of the car crash. Sir Kenneth's injury *might* have been caused by a headlong drive into a frozen ditch—but until the post mortem we can't be absolutely sure. These are facts which can't be overlooked, sir."

"I am horrified," said the lawyer slowly.

Dr. Trumper, after appearing to be on the point of an angry outburst, took hold of himself and shrugged his shoulders. He even smiled in a defeated kind of way. It was the first time Johnny had seen him smile, and it altered the whole expression of his grim, cadaverous face; he looked almost human.

"I give up," he said simply. "You're so much against me, inspector, that I must submit. But the very thought of poor Parsloe having been done to death by a desperate criminal revolts me. I hope to God it *was* an accident."

"Amen to that," said Mr. Dinglewell fervently. "There'll be quite enough unsavoury publicity without the distasteful sensation of murder. All I hope, Mr. Cromwell, is that you stay on until you have cleared up the matter beyond doubt."

"All depends upon your chief constable, sir," replied Ironsides. "If he doesn't call the Yard in, I shall have to go back to London. I'm only here now because I happen to be on the spot . . . Who is the chief constable in these parts?"

"Major-General Batters—but I believe he's seriously ill with gout just now," said Mr. Dinglewell. "H'm! I see. Like the legal profession, and the medical profession, you police officers have to be careful of avoiding one another's corns, eh? Well, that's your business, of course."

Johnny Lister noticed that there was an additional droop to Dr. Benjamin Trumper's shoulders. Since Mr. Dinglewell's arrival the strange looking medico had lost a great deal of his authority. The reason was plain. With the lawyer in the house he no longer had any standing. Sir Kenneth Parsloe had no family. He had been a bachelor who lived alone. His unexpected death, therefore, placed a big responsibility on the shoulders of his lawyer.

"Parsloe wasn't married, was he?" asked Cromwell, as though for the sake of something to say. "What happens to the property? Does anybody inherit?"

"There's Philip, of course," said Mr. Dinglewell slowly, with a dubious glance at Dr. Trumper.

"Who's Philip?"

"Parsloe's younger brother. I've never seen him—at least, not since he was a mere youth—and I don't think you've seen him at all, have you, Trumper?" replied the lawyer. "I'm afraid there might be complications . . ." He frowned. "Yes, we're likely to meet with a lot of difficulties."

"What kind of difficulties?" asked Cromwell.

"Well, you know what it is when a rich bachelor suddenly dies—distant relatives crop up from all corners of the country," replied the lawyer, frowning. "If the next-of-kin isn't to be found, there's hell to pay. Everybody's scrambling to get a bit of the estate."

"Have you any reason to suppose that Philip Parsloe can't be found?"

"Plenty of reason, unfortunately. He's only about two years younger than poor Kenneth, and years ago they quarrelled. Nothing in that . . . Brothers often quarrel. These two quarrelled when they were boys, they quarrelled when they were at college, and as far as I can make out they've been quarrelling ever since."

"That's not quite true, Dinglewell," put in Dr. Trumper. "Recently, they have been getting on quite well . . ."

"So Parsloe told me a few weeks ago—but he also told me that he hasn't seen Philip for years," said the lawyer. "This reconciliation took effect, I understand, through the medium of the post." He turned to Cromwell. "In many ways Parsloe was a hard, unforgiving man, but he must have had a soft spot somewhere or he would not have helped his worthless brother as much as he did. We shall have to find Philip, of course. Higham Top is a very valuable estate, with a handsome income. Parsloe was a very rich man."

"You said 'worthless brother,' didn't you, sir?" asked Bill Cromwell gently. "Anything particularly wrong with him? Why can't he be easily found? Hasn't he got a home?"

"A club in London—a hotel in Monte Carlo—another hotel in New York," replied Mr. Dinglewell tartly. "That's the only kind of home Philip has known for some years, I believe."

"Rolling stone, eh?"

"Yes, and like the proverbial rolling stone he has gathered no moss. I know for a fact that he has been kept going for the last year, at least, by his brother. Where Philip is at the moment I can't say. He might be anywhere. California—

Egypt—South of France. It's difficult—although not as difficult as it might be. He's certain to be in some place where he can make use of his ready wits."

"I get it, sir. A bad egg."

"Well, no . . . not exactly. I'd hardly call Philip a bad egg. I think he's inherently lazy. He's not the type to settle down to a regular job. There are plenty like him . . . younger sons of rich families. . . . There have been one or two trivial scandals, I believe—mostly connected with cards. Hushed up, of course."

"Really, Dinglewell, I can't see any reason for telling Mr. Cromwell, these rumours," said Dr. Trumper, with heat.

"After all, they are only rumours."

"Just the kind of thing I like to hear, sir," said Cromwell placidly. "I like to get a mental picture, if I can, of a man's character. I'm afraid it's going to be my duty, Mr. Dinglewell, to ask you a few pointed questions about Brother Philip."

"In God's name, man, what are you implying?" demanded the doctor, with a startled look. "Have you the unprecedented impudence to suggest . . ."

"I'm not suggesting anything, sir—but you'd be surprised how impudent I can be when I feel like it," retorted Ironsides sourly. "You won't object, I hope," he added, with sarcasm, "if I put a few more questions to Mr. Dinglewell?"

"I'm afraid Trumper is very upset," said the lawyer, embarrassed by this passage. "Surely, Trumper, you must realise that the chief inspector is only doing his duty?"

The doctor turned his back sulkily.

"All I'm after," said Ironsides, "is facts . . ."

"Indeed, sir!" rapped out Trumper, spinning round again. "A minute ago you said you were interested in rumours. Which, pray, is it to be?"

"Really, gentlemen . . ." protested the lawyer.

"Facts . . . and rumours," explained Cromwell calmly.

"As I see it, this fine estate and a big income is inherited by a pretty worthless younger brother—present whereabouts unknown—who has spent most of his life quarrelling with the late Sir Kenneth . . ."

"Forgive me, Mr. Cromwell, but I feel that I must protest," interrupted Mr. Dinglewell. "I hope I have not given you the impression that Mr. Philip Parsloe—now, by the way, Sir Philip—is a 'worthless' fellow. A wanderer, yes—a man who has never had regular employment, I will admit. But I know nothing seriously detrimental against him."

"Except that he lives by his wits?"

"No, Mr. Cromwell—not at all. In the sense that you police officers use the term, it means card-sharping, confidence trickery, and such like. Philip may have made one or two slips at cards, but nothing serious. He has never been involved in any discreditable scandal. For some years, I believe, he earned his living at journalism, and even wrote one or two successful travel books. Mostly, he lives abroad. About a year ago he was very much up against it—I am only telling you what I know from odd remarks which Sir Kenneth let drop—and he wrote to his brother in a surprisingly chastened manner. Sir Kenneth, responding to this mood, replied in a friendly way. Other letters passed between them, and the old quarrel was forgotten."

"I can vouch for that," said Dr. Trumper, with a glare at Cromwell. "Parsloe was quite frank with me. And why not? I am his oldest friend. . . . He often talked to me about Philip. He showed me some of Philip's letters. I know for a fact that he sent him close on a thousand pounds, at odd times, during the past twelve months."

"And I was very glad to hear of this healing of an old wound," said the lawyer. "For many years Sir Kenneth would have nothing to do with his brother; whenever he referred to Philip in my presence he did so with extreme bitterness, to say nothing of the use of strong language."

"I don't think you're helping much, Dinglewell," said Trumper angrily. "Surely you can see what Mr. Cromwell has been driving at?"

"Oh, yes, I can see—and I'm glad of it," replied the lawyer, with professional austerity. "It gives us an opportunity to face the matter openly and boldly. It is only fair to Philip. He inherits a great fortune—and obviously he had a very excellent motive for killing his brother. But I don't think for one moment that he *did* kill his brother. I shall be surprised if he is in England at this moment. Surely it is only a matter of routine investigation to learn of Philip's whereabouts?"

"That's all, sir," said Cromwell. "We'll find him."

"Before you even start to find him," said the doctor, "you are prejudiced against him. . . ."

"No, sir—nothing of the kind. Philip Parsloe is no more under suspicion than you are yourself."

"I'm surprised you don't suspect me!" snapped Trumper.

"Could be, sir," murmured Ironsides.

"Well, that's splendid! Considering that I was with you

on my own doorstep at approximately the time Parsloe was getting killed”

“For God’s sake, Trumper, stop this nonsense,” interrupted Mr. Dinglewell impatiently. “Mr. Cromwell is only chaffing and I must say you asked for it.” He turned back to the chief inspector. “I remember talking with Sir Kenneth a month or two ago; he was telling me that his earlier treatment of Philip had been unduly harsh; he was convinced, he told me, that Philip was not half as bad as he had been painted. Sir Kenneth, at that time, had just sent his brother a couple of hundred pounds.”

“And very nice, too,” commented Cromwell. “He’s got more than a couple of hundred pounds now, hasn’t he? He inherits the lot, eh? The whole works?”

“As next-of-kin, he naturally inherits every stick and stone of the estate,” replied the lawyer. “Under a will Sir Kenneth drew up with my help in September of last year—that’s to say, about five months ago—he bequeathed every penny of his considerable fortune to his brother. . . . No, I am wrong. There is one substantial legacy.”

At this point Mr. Dinglewell hesitated, as though he had been indiscreet, and he cast a quick, inquisitive glance at Mr. Trumper.

“Why do you look at me?” asked the doctor.

“I was wondering . . . Didn’t Sir Kenneth tell you anything about this legacy?”

“I don’t know anything about a legacy. Why should I know anything of Parsloe’s personal affairs?”

“It occurred to me that you might have been told of this one,” said Mr. Dinglewell dryly. “In his will, my dear doctor, Sir Kenneth has left you the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEATH ROOM

DR. BENJAMIN TRUMPER'S yellowish face was a mask of blank astonishment ; his lower jaw dropped so much that he nearly lost his false teeth. His deeply sunken eyes, behind their big spectacles, held the dazed look of one who is just recovering from a severe physical blow. Staring at Mr. Dinglewell, he slowly ran a hand through his mop of white-grey hair.

"For me?" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "*Twenty-five thousand pounds?*"

"To be used, Sir Kenneth instructs, in the furtherance of your experiemntal work."

"Incredible," muttered the doctor.

If he was putting on an act, he was doing it extremely well. Chief Inspector Cromwell, watching him closely, was unable to decide one way or the other.

"I thought you might as well know at once," continued the lawyer kindly. "Forgive me if I gave you too much of a shock. I had no intention of upsetting you, Trumper."

"Upsetting me?" muttered the doctor, removing his spectacles and polishing them with his handkerchief. "God knows I'm not upset. I'm thunderstruck. Parsloe hinted once or twice that he intended to 'leave me in his will,' but he always said it jokingly. In any case, I'm an older man, and . . . Now he lies upstairs, dead . . . Twenty-five thousand!" His eyes began to glow with excitement. "I shall be able to give up my practice—to devote my whole energies to the work I really love . . . This is uncommonly good of Parsloe. You're sure, Dinglewell? Forgive me, but I cannot fully grasp . . ."

"There's no doubt about it, doctor. You'll get the money as soon as the will is proved," said the lawyer. "There are, of course, one or two trifling legacies to Beale and his wife, and the head gardener . . ."

"Those letters," said Cromwell, in his abrupt way.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Letters, sir. Philip's letters."

"I expect we shall find one or two amongst Sir Kenneth's papers—although that is by no means certain. Sir Kenneth had a way of destroying letters as soon as he had read them.

He detested correspondence and I was always scolding him for not keeping files."

"Well, does anybody know when Philip's last letter came?"

"I don't," said Mr. Dinglewell, and he looked at Trumper.

"Eh?" said the latter. "Oh, ten days ago. . . . No, it was nearly a fortnight ago."

"Know where it was posted, sir?" asked Cromwell.

"Genoa, I believe. Yes, it was Genoa. Parsloe was telling me. . . . He was a bit irritable that day, and he was saying it was a fine thing for Philip to be enjoying himself in warm Mediterranean sunshine on his money while we had to trudge about through slush and mud." Dr. Trumper, although still excited, was recovering his balance. "But don't imagine from this that Philip is still in Genoa. For all we know he's in Monte Carlo by this time. Wouldn't it be a good idea to advertise in the London papers?"

"Yes, sir, it would be a very good idea—and that's exactly what we'll do," said Cromwell promptly. "It's not too late to get the advert in to-morrow's issues," he added, glancing at the clock. "Official priority, you know. . . . I'll get busy the phone presently. I think I'll ring up the B.B.C., too, and get them to send out a broadcast appeal for Philip Parsloe. That'll be even better than the newspapers—because the radio is heard all over Europe. Might as well do it now."

He rose in a tired kind of way and, taking Mr. Dinglewell with him, went to the telephone in the library. Inspector Catchpole, who had been getting very restless, started to make some kind of protest, but, finding himself jammed in his chair when he tried to rise, gave it up.

Ironsides and the lawyer were busy on the long distance phone for some fifteen or twenty minutes; but when they returned to the morning-room they had the satisfaction of knowing that there would be a good deal of publicity concerning Sir Philip Parsloe in the morning.

"Oughtn't we to be getting on with the job, sir?" wheezed Catchpole, buttonholing Cromwell and talking in a low voice. "Time's getting on, you know. . . . Fred Root's down at the place where the car crashed, and I expect the poor chap's self frozen to death. There's Hatherton, too. . . ."

"All right, inspector—all right," said Cromwell soothingly.

"Everything's under control. It may seem to you that I'm taking things in a leisurely way, but you're not used to my methods."

"But I thought you said I'm in charge of the case, sir?" puffed Catchpole.

"So you are," replied Ironsides blandly. "Until I get specific instructions from my own chief I'm more or less a spectator. Better keep your eyes open, Catchpole; I believe this case is going to spring a few surprises."

He moved away from the stout inspector before the latter could put any more questions. Johnny Lister was enjoying a quiet private smile. Ironsides, the old fraud, was so interested in the problem that he was not likely to relinquish his grip unless somebody came along and hit him with a blunt instrument. To say that Inspector Catchpole was in charge was sheer pretence—and transparent pretence, at that.

"Well, I suppose I'd better be getting along," said Cromwell reluctantly, and ostentatiously stifling a yawn. "Nothing more I can do to-night. I dare say I shall be seeing something of you to-morrow, Mr. Dinglewell. . . . And you, too, sir," he added, turning suddenly on Dr. Trumper. "There are one or two angles that puzzle me. . . . I'll tackle 'em better, though, after a good night's sleep. Not," he added, "that I'm likely to get a good night's sleep at the Green Dragon."

"It's not a bad place, Mr. Cromwell," said Catchpole.

"I know—I know," said Ironsides, with a sidelong glance at Mr. Dinglewell. "I've sampled these village inns before. Stuffy rooms . . . damp sheets . . . mattresses full of half bricks and shaped like mountains. . . . I shall probably get rheumatic fever, to say nothing of lumbago, but the Green Dragon is better than nothing."

Mr. Dinglewell accepted the bait unsuspectingly.

"Why go to the Green Dragon at all, Mr. Cromwell?" he asked. "If it is necessary for you to remain in the neighbourhood, I beg of you to accept the hospitality of this house. There are plenty of spare bedrooms, and Mrs. Beale can soon prepare one for you. Naturally, I shall stay here myself. There will be much to be done to-morrow . . ."

"Well, that's very kind of you, sir," said Ironsides promptly. "I accept gladly. My sergeant, young Lister here, will stay with me, if you don't mind."

A protest, only half stifled, came from Dr. Trumper, but apparently realising that he had no status in the matter, he relapsed into silence. Mr. Dinglewell, as the legal representative of the dead man, and in the absence of any responsible relative, was in full charge.

"While the beds are being made up, perhaps I'd better go

along with Inspector Catchpole and take another look at the damaged car," continued Cromwell, in a weary voice. "How about you, doctor? We'll give you a lift home, if you like. It won't take us much out of our way."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Cromwell," said Dr. Trumper stiffly. "Yes, perhaps I'd better go home. There is nothing more I can do in this tragic house to-night."

He gave the impression that he would have liked to stay, but he had no valid excuse for staying. Moreover, Cromwell's invitation had sounded very much like an order.

Johnny Lister drove the car on that cold ride to Lower Martin. Ironsides, silent and thoughtful, sat beside him; and Inspector Catchpole and Dr. Trumper occupied the rear seats. It was not until the doctor had been deposited at his own front gate, and the car was on its way to the scene of the smash, that Catchpole was able to voice his thoughts.

"Glad we've got rid of that old boy," he wheezed. "What do you make of him, Mr. Cromwell? If you ask me, there's something dashed queer about him."

"Think so?" jerked Ironsides.

"Well, don't you, sir? Even allowing for the fact that he's upset at the death of an old friend, it doesn't seem to explain why he was so excited earlier on. Quarrelsome, too. I mean, the way he kept on insisting it was an accident. I think we ought to watch Dr. Trumper."

"Watch him all you like—but it's too early to jump to any conclusions," replied Cromwell. "As I said before, I think this case is going to spring one or two surprises . . ."

"He comes in for a pretty fat legacy, sir . . ."

"Twenty-five thousand quid," said the Scotland Yard man musingly. "Yes, as Johnny would say, that's no chicken feed. Many a man has been murdered for a fragment of that sum . . . I don't know whether Trumper knew about the legacy or not. He pretended not to, anyway. A nice piece of acting if he *was* acting."

"What the dickens are you getting at, Old Iron?" asked Johnny Lister. "Trumper couldn't have done it, and you know it. He was falling down his own front steps . . ."

"At the very time Parsloe was getting killed, eh?" interrupted Cromwell. "Yes, I know. That gives him a cast-iron alibi. He couldn't have two better witnesses than you and I, could he?"

"That's what I mean," said Johnny.

"Well, it's my opinion that Dr. Trumper knows a sight

more than he's admitted," said Catchpole obstinately. "I'm not saying he murdered Parsloe, or anything like that. He couldn't have done. But there's something fishy about him, all the same."

When they reached the damaged car they found that Sergeant Root, a big husky man with a complexion which had been improved by an outdoor life and four daily pints of beer, had been reinforced by an eager young constable. Both were stamping about on the frosty road, trying to keep themselves warm.

"There hasn't been any other traffic, sir, except one car," reported Root; "and we kept that well on the other side of the road, as you instructed. There hasn't been any more snow, and it doesn't look like there will be any more. Freezing heaven's hard now."

"Any word come from your police station—about Hatherton, I mean?"

"No, sir."

The car was subjected to a minute examination. Cromwell, always thorough, went over it inch by inch, while Johnny Lister stood by with the powerful torchlight. At last, stiff with cold, his fingers nearly frozen, Ironsides was compelled to admit that he had drawn a blank. He had made no progress at all. At least, all the facts that he could dig up supported the theory that Sir Kenneth Parsloe's car had developed an unmanageable skid and had swerved at high speed into the ditch. That Sir Kenneth should have been flung out without smashing the windscreen was quite feasible.

"Well, we've got nowhere," grunted Cromwell, as he stood back and regarded the car with a malevolent expression on his face. "If young Hatherton was in this car, or came anywhere near it, he didn't leave any trace. Not even a footprint in the snow. Hatherton's footprints stop on the other side of the hedge—although I think there are one or two traces in the ditch, near where the body was lying. Nothing that we can really get hold of, though."

"Which means, I suppose, sir, that Dr. Trumper's been right all along?" puffed Catchpole. "Sir Kenneth was killed by accident, and Hatherton's presence on the spot was a coincidence."

"What I think," said Ironsides heavily, "is that we'd better sleep on it. Ready, Johnny? We'll get back to Higham Top. . . . Why do they give these big country houses such

potty names? Better leave somebody in charge here, inspector. We can't get the car shifted until to-morrow . . ."

"It's all very well to talk about sleeping on it, Mr. Cromwell, but there won't be much sleep for me," interrupted the irascible inspector. "I've got to get along to the police station and report. We don't know how the hunt for Hatherton is getting on. Dammit, sir, how *could* it have been an accident with that young fiend on the very spot? I believe he did it. And do you know how?" he added eagerly. "I believe Sir Kenneth was thrown out of the car because of the skid, but he was only dazed. Hatherton comes up and finds him lying in the ditch—and it's an opportunity in a million. He's already got a weapon in his hand—a chunk of wood, or a spanner, or something—and he finishes Parsloe off with a terrific whack on the head."

"Could be," admitted Cromwell slowly.

"It fits. Don't you see how it fits, sir?"

"It fits all right—but don't go twisting facts, when you dig 'em up, to fit your theories," warned the Scotland Yard man. "Keep an open mind, inspector. Still, it's your case, and I'm not going to interfere."

At that remark Johnny Lister nearly laughed outright. In the first place, it was not Catchpole's case at all, and Ironsides had been interfering from the first—and he had every intention of interfering some more.

It seemed to Johnny, too, that Bill Cromwell was worried about something. His face, never particularly cheery, was screwed up into a puzzled, exasperated frown. He looked like a man who is grasping at an elusive memory which keeps just out of reach. During the ride back to Higham Top he did not speak a word, but sat hunched up beside Johnny, staring straight through the windscreen on to the snowy road, with that same far-away look on his forbidding face.

Mr. Dinglewell had arranged everything very nicely. Under his instructions, Beale had prepared a comfortable bedroom for the Scotland Yard pair. There were two beds, and they looked extraordinarily comfortable, and a cheerful fire was blazing and crackling in the old-fashioned grate. After the bitterness of the night outside, the room was gratefully warm and cosy.

"This is something like, Old Iron," remarked Johnny, as he toasted his hands before the blaze. "I don't know how the devil you do it. Instead of half-freezing to death in a miserable

inn bedroom, here we are in this whacking great house, practically guests of honour."

"A house of death, Johnny, remember."

"So what?" The sergeant had no intention of being callous. "Parsloe's nothing to us. Just another dead man. Have you taken a look at these beds? Feathers a yard high, and the softest eiderdown quilts I've ever seen."

"Then why not get undressed and dive into one of them?" asked Ironsides irritably.

He drew a big chair towards the fire, settled himself comfortably in it, and began to fill his pipe.

"Aren't you going to bed?"

"Presently," said Cromwell thoughtfully. "I want to sit here for a bit and think."

"Good old Sherlock Holmes," grinned Johnny. "That was his favourite wheeze, wasn't it? Where's the old slipper with the shag tobacco? Thank goodness I'm not Watson. If I were, I'd wake up in the morning half-gassed and find you in a thick fog of tobacco smoke."

"And the problem solved," nodded Ironsides sourly. "I only wish problems *could* be solved so easily, Johnny! Why must you talk? Can't you go to bed?"

"Don't worry—I'm going."

The sergeant was a healthy young animal, and he was sound asleep within two minutes of burying his head in the downy pillow. Five minutes later he was snoring. Not that Ironsides was disturbed or irritated by the snore; he did not even hear it. He was still thinking deeply.

"What a fool!" he muttered suddenly, after half an hour had elapsed. "What a blithering chump. . . . The thing was in my mind all the time, and I couldn't get hold of it. . . . I even talked about. . . ." He pulled at his pipe, musing. "Hell! It's a pretty tall order, though! If there's anything like that at the back of this business I shall have the chief sitting on my head and yelling for loony doctors when I tell him. . . ."

The theory which had come into his mind, indeed, was so incredible that he hardly gave it serious thought at the beginning. Then, his mind reverting to Dr. Benjamin Trumper, he concentrated on this latter gentleman. Finally, he rose to his feet and knocked out his pipe. He moved towards the door and paused for a moment absolutely halfway across the room, fingering his big electric torch.

"Well, why not?" he muttered defiantly.

He was acting rather like a child who stands in front of a

dark cupboard, afraid to open it for fear of the ghosts that lurked within. At the same time, he felt that he was about to make a very big fool of himself. Not that this would matter. . . . Nobody else would see him . . . nobody else would know.

"Oh, hell!" he grunted, making up his mind.

He tip-toed to the door, passed out on to the wide upper hall and then softly made his way to the death room—the room in which lay the stiffened remains of Sir Kenneth Parsloe. The great house was silent, except for the faint sound of wind as it whistled round the roof. A big window, slightly less black than the rest of the darkness, revealed one or two twinkling stars above the restless chestnuts.

With his hand on the knob of the death room, Cromwell received a check. The door, unexpectedly, was locked.

"Now, I wonder why they locked this door?" he murmured, his senses very much on the alert. "Afraid somebody would walk in and make off with the corpse? This is beginning to look . . . interesting."

A man like Ironsides Cromwell was not to be deterred from his purpose by a locked door—especially an old-fashioned door of this kind, equipped with a lock that nine schoolboys out of ten could conquer with a hairpin. Ironsides has no hairpin, but he had in his pocket a bunch of exceedingly unorthodox keys. Many of them looked suspiciously like skeleton keys.

He crouched down, flashed his light on the keyhole, and got busy. His deft, nimble fingers silently operated one key after another. In two minutes he was successful. The door softly opened.

He switched off his torch, slid into the chamber of death, and closed the door behind him. For a few moments he remained as silent and as still as that other figure which was stretched on the bed somewhere in the darkness. Not a particle of light entered the room, for heavy curtains were drawn across the windows. It might have been the family vault itself.

When Cromwell got into action, as he did immediately afterwards, he did some very strange things. With the torch-light full on, he tip-toed to the bed and uncovered the mortal remains of Sir Kenneth Parsloe. The dead man's face, with its striking black beard, looked weird in the cold electric light. Not that Ironsides was affected in the slightest degree; he had seen death in many ghastly forms. Moreover, he was too intent on his task to worry about nerves.

He re-examined the ugly skull fracture which had apparently been the cause of death. There was not much skin injury, although the bruising was severe; and the frontal bone had been savagely crushed. Accident or murder? Cromwell was unable to make up his mind.

He continued his examination—and a most surprising and thorough examination it proved to be. Most of it seemed to be unnecessary and bordered on the outrageous. It was a task which had to be accomplished in complete solitude, for Cromwell's theory was so startling that he dared not take anybody into his confidence until he had obtained some supporting evidence . . .

"Good God!" he whispered tensely.

He was looking at the dead man's hands through a powerful magnifying lens—examining, in particular, the fingernails. His whole body was now tense, like a contracted spring. His eyes glowed with a tremendous suppressed excitement. Having finished with the fingernails, he transferred his attention to the dead man's hair and beard, even going to the surprising length of tugging out a few hairs by the roots and examining them separately under the lens.

"Good God!" he whispered again.

He carefully placed the hairs in a little envelope and stowed the latter away. An intelligent spectator, had there been one present, might have supposed that Cromwell was looking for some traces of poison. Obviously, he was not satisfied with the evidence of the skull fracture. Many poisons—arsenic among them—leave traces in the victim's fingernails or in the hair—unmistakable to the expert eye.

The chief inspector had found something to arouse his acute interest. For he now proceeded to examine, with the greatest care, the dead man's left knee. For some reason known only to himself he was uncommonly interested in that left knee. By the time he had finished, and had carefully drawn the sheet over the corpse again, he gave a little sigh of gloating satisfaction.

"A hell of a long shot—but I was right!" he muttered. "I thought, somehow, that this affair was going to be out of the ordinary. I can see a lot of interesting work ahead."

He left the death room as silently as he had entered, re-locking the door after him. Within five minutes he was in bed and sound asleep. He had settled a point which had been worrying him considerably, and his mind was temporarily at rest.

When Johnny Lister awoke at a quite reasonably early hour, to find the weak winter's daylight streaming through the windows, the first thing he heard was a queer moaning sound from the adjoining bathroom, as though something had gone wrong with the hot water cistern. Not that Johnny was puzzled. He shared a flat with Ironsides and he knew that it was only Mr. Cromwell humming while he washed.

"You seem pretty peppy this morning, Old Iron," said Johnny, when the chief inspector appeared, half-dressed, vigorously drying himself.

"I have an idea, my good Johnny, that things are going to show a nice turn of speed to-day," said Cromwell complacently. "It's a clear morning, freezing like old boots, and later on I think it'll be sunny."

"A fat lot you care about the weather, you old humbug. What are you trying to do—kid me? Last night you were as grumpy and peevish as a dyspeptic warthog."

"That's no way to talk about your superior officer, my lad," said Ironsides rebukingly.

"Now I *know* you've got something up your sleeve," said Johnny. "You never get on your high horse like that unless you're keeping something back from me. I've been blind as usual, I suppose? I've failed to spot a clue that was standing out like a beacon, eh? I've heard those tales before. Am I supposed to be a magician, or something? Seeing that I'm your assistant, the least you can do is to take me into your confidence."

"My what, did you say?" sniffed Ironsides. "All you're good for is to drive that car of yours and look ornamental. . . . By the way, I suppose you realise you're in a bit of a mess over this job? You were off duty yesterday when you brought me down, and you were supposed to report for work this morning."

"I'm leaving all the explanations to you, old thing," said Johnny cheerfully. "This case is bigger than you've let on, or you wouldn't still be here yourself."

"Yes, you're right, at that," admitted Cromwell. "You're going to get one or two surprises before we're through, Johnny. No, don't ask any questions. The thing I've got in mind can't be spilled to anybody—not even you—until I've dug up something to support it. . . . Dug up," he added cryptically, "is right."

Johnny stared at him as he turned away, shrugged, and gave it up. He knew Cromwell too well to waste time in asking

fruitless questions. The chief inspector's middle name was Clam.

When they went downstairs the first person they saw in the hall was Inspector Catchpole.

Large as the hall was, the inspector seemed to half fill it. He was fairly prancing up and down in a condition of excitement and jubilation, and Johnny wondered why the house was not shaking.

"They told me you'd be down in a minute, sir," he said, hurrying towards the foot of the stairs. "I thought I'd better come and see you personally. We've got him."

"Hatherton?"

"He was nabbed just on the other side of Croydon last night," said Catchpole, with satisfaction. "A smart piece of work. He was pulled up by some lights, at a place called Broad Green, and a sharp-eyed policeman noticed that there were some deep scratches on his face. Just as the lights were changing, he signalled to the man to stop, but the young blighter trod on the gas and tore away. He was a bit too fast, though. He skidded on the icy road, came an awful cropper, and was nabbed. He turned out to be Hatherton all right. Croydon told me over the phone this morning that he's being brought to Higham St. Andrew this morning. He's there by now, I expect."

"Not bad," said Cromwell grudgingly.

"What do you mean, sir—not bad? Hatherton's the man we want, isn't he? He was on the spot. If he didn't kill Parsloe himself, he must know who did. He was an eyewitness."

"Guesswork, inspector," jerked Ironsides. "We know Hatherton was on the spot at *approximately* the same time, but the killer may have gone before he arrived. Always supposing, as you say, that he himself isn't the killer. Do you know if he's willing to make a statement?"

"No, but we can soon find out," said Catchpole, as he made for the door. "It won't take us long to get into the village..." He paused as he saw that Ironsides was making no attempt to follow. "Aren't you coming, sir?"

"If you think I'm going to spend an hour sitting in a cold and draughty police station before I've had my breakfast, you're crazy," retorted Cromwell tartly. "I can smell frying bacon—and not coffee. I'm hungry."

"I see." Catchpole looked slightly nonplussed. "Well, just as you say, sir. I had my breakfast an hour ago..."

"Fine. Then you can shoot back to the police station and give me a ring as soon as Hatherton turns up."

Catchpole went off, hardly knowing whether to be annoyed or amused by the Scotland Yard man's irregular methods. Cromwell himself walked into the morning-room and found it occupied by Mr. Dinglewell, with Beale in the act of pouring coffee. Both were looking somewhat strained and hollow-eyed after an obviously sleepless night.

"I've just got time for a bite of breakfast, sir, before I go along to the local police station to get a statement from Hatherton, the murderer," said Ironsides briskly, as he sat down at the table. "Yes, they've got him. I thought they would. What a mug he was to stick to that motor-bike . . ."

"This is excellent news, Mr. Cromwell," said the lawyer interestedly. "Perhaps this young Hatherton will be able to throw some light on the affair. You'll be able to tell, I suppose, whether he's guilty or not?"

"Hard to say," replied Cromwell. "Some of these blighters can lie like politicians, and look you straight in the eye while they're doing it . . . What's this, Beale? Kidneys and bacon? I oughtn't to eat stuff of this kind at this hour of the day, but I'll try a little. . . . I suppose you'll be on hand here, at Higham Top, Mr. Dinglewell, if I want another word with you? Hey, Beale! When I said a 'little' I didn't mean a miserable scrap like this!"

"Give him the dish, Beale," advised Johnny Lister.

"Yes, I shall be busy all day, I dare say," said the lawyer. "I may have to run over to Guildford, to my office, but I shall be back. It's my task to make the necessary funeral arrangements, and to see to a hundred and one other things. It may be several days before we hear anything from Philip."

"And yet," said Ironsides, halting a forkful of kidney halfway to his mouth, "I fancy we shall be hearing something of Brother Philip—if not actually seeing him—before nightfall."

"I hope you're right. Why are you so sure?"

"I'm not sure. But bad news travels fast. So does good news. There's been a lot of publicity about Sir Kenneth's death, not only in the newspapers, but over the wireless. He was a prominent county man, and there has been a big stir because his death was so tragic and mysterious. The added fact that Hatherton is mixed up in the case has given the publicity hounds a first-class sensation."

"What do you think Philip will do when he hears the news?"

"I think he'll wire straight to you, and then come shooting down here as fast as a car can bring him," replied Ironsides. "That's what I'd do, anyway, if I suddenly learned that I'd inherited a title and a fat income."

Soon afterwards, while Mr. Dinglewell went off to interview the estate steward, Ironsides and Johnny went into the village and found the little police station. A telephone message had come just as breakfast was finishing to the effect that Hatherton had arrived.

Inspector Catchpole was in the office, waiting. As Cromwell had guessed, it was a draughty office, although a big fire was doing its best to warm it.

"Had a word with him yet?"

"No, sir," said Catchpole. "He's in a cell. I thought I'd better wait for you."

"Very nice of you, inspector. Well, bring him in."

Johnny Lister experienced something of a mild shock when, some minutes later, Maurice Hatherton was brought into the office by Sergeant Root. Johnny had been expecting to see a man of definitely criminal type with hard-bitten and brutal features. His imagination had pictured the murderer as a vicious degenerate.

In actual fact, Maurice Hatherton was a straight, well set-up young fellow with broad athletic shoulders. Allowing for the stubble of beard on his chin, and the grime all over his face, he was good looking—and his face was the face of a gentleman. He even carried himself with that indefinable air which comes only of good breeding. It was a frank, refined face, now marred by ugly scratches and lines of almost unbearable weariness. His eyes, hot and aching with tiredness, were nevertheless steady.

"All right, Hatherton, you can sit down if you want to," said Cromwell kindly.

The prisoner slumped into the seat, for he was almost in the last stages of exhaustion.

CHAPTER FIVE

.. PORTRAIT OF A MURDERER

SERGEANT ROOT, noting Hatherton's behaviour, vouchsafed a word of explanation.

"Had to wake him up, sir. He fell asleep two minutes after I locked him in the cell."

"I'm all right," said the prisoner, making an effort to sit up straight. "You want to ask me a lot of questions, I suppose. All right. Fire ahead."

He spoke in a dull voice, and there was an inexpressibly hopeless look in his eyes. A flash of defiance, noticeable at first, had soon disappeared.

"You're tired and sleepy, and I'll try to make this talk as brief as possible," said Bill Cromwell, edging his chair a little nearer to that of the convict. "Listen, Hatherton. If you didn't kill Sir Kenneth Parsloe there's nothing for you to worry about . . ."

"That's right . . . nothing for me to worry about," muttered Hatherton tonelessly. "Parsloe's dead. That means I'll never wring a confession out of him . . ." He looked up with a wild light in his eyes. "Don't you understand?" he shouted hoarsely. "It means that my last chance has gone. It means that I shall have to serve out my full term. . . . Twenty years of hell . . ." He quietened down, and lowering his head, pressed his fingertips against his forehead. "When I come out I shall be an old man . . . a branded murderer. And now there's no hope."

Inspector Catchpole gave Ironsides and Johnny a questioning glance, as though he were puzzled by the prisoner's outburst, which had been quite unexpected.

"Supposing we confine ourselves to what happened last night, Hatherton?" suggested Cromwell gently. "Johnny, got a cigarette? You'd like to smoke, wouldn't you, Hatherton?"

"Thank you," said the prisoner eagerly.

He took the cigarette in a trembling clutch, and the first few puffs he took were almost painfully vigorous. He inhaled deeply and seemed much steadier.

"I'm Chief Inspector Cromwell, of Scotland Yard," con-

tinued Ironsides. "If you don't feel like making a statement, Hatherton, I've no means of compelling you. What I mean is, you don't need to make a statement unless you like."

"I'll make a statement."

"Well, that's fine. Whatever you say will be entirely voluntary, you understand—but it's my duty to warn you that it will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you."

"Old stuff," said Hatherton, with a faint effort at a wry smile, which gave his face a boyish look. "I've been through all that before. . . . I've got nothing to hide, inspector. I'm stunned—knocked cold—by the knowledge that that skunk, Parsloe, is dead. Nothing else matters. . . ."

"Well, we won't go into that again," interrupted Cromwell. "I'd like you to tell me just what you did at the scene of that car crash last night, and why you were there."

"I was there more or less by chance," replied Maurice Hatherton readily. "I didn't kill Parsloe. He was dead when I got to the spot. I didn't know he *was* Parsloe until I saw his face. . . . My God, that was a shock! Parsloe dead! The man I'd broken gaol to confront, face to face, so that I could knock his teeth down the back of his throat. . . . There he was, lying in that ditch, dead." The prisoner looked wild again. "For a minute I nearly went crazy with disappointment. All my trouble for nothing . . . all my hours of torture wasted. I had got free of the cordon round Dartmoor, I had come right across England, only to find that the man I wanted to choke into a confession was dead. There he was, lying there in that ditch, killed in some footling accident."

There was a pause while Johnny Lister finished his shorthand notes of that long speech.

"If it was an accident," added Hatherton unexpectedly, before Cromwell could put another question.

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm not sure it was an accident. I think there was somebody else with Parsloe at the time of the crash."

"Now, listen, Hatherton," said Cromwell kindly. "Take my advice and keep strictly to the truth. No need for me to tell you that you're under suspicion of a second murder. You say there was somebody else with Parsloe—but I was on the spot very soon afterwards, and there was snow on the road. The only marks in the snow were the marks of Parsloe's car. No footprints on the road at all. So think carefully. . . ."

"I don't care whether there were any footprints or not,"

interrupted the prisoner. "I didn't kill that swine, and I've nothing to hide, and I believe there *was* somebody with him."

"That's the second time you've said you didn't kill him—but you came here last night to kill him, didn't you?"

"That's a lie! All I wanted to do was to get face to face with the perjuring rat and choke the truth out of him," shouted Hatherton. "You've no right to say things like that, inspector."

"Well, maybe I haven't," agreed Cromwell. "I'm sorry. I withdraw it. Johnny, delete those passages from your notes. . . . Go ahead, Hatherton. If it's going to make it easier, make it a bit clearer why you had such an obsession to get face to face with Sir Kenneth Parsloe."

"He perjured himself in the witness box at my trial," replied the prisoner quickly. "The evidence he gave was a foul and absolute lie. And why? Because he killed old Warner Easton himself—and plotted to make me take the blame. From the first minute I entered prison my only thought was to escape—to get away—to confront Parsloe. That's why I was in this district last night. I was on my way to Higham Top. . . . Luck had been with me from the start. I found that motor-bike somewhere in the West Country, and I got a fresh supply of petrol by siphoning it out of the tank of a lorry at a road halt. I kept off the main roads as much as I could, which is one reason why I was on that bye-lane last night. My idea was to take Parsloe by surprise—to catch him alone in his own library."

He stopped, coughing badly, for some of the cigarette smoke had got down his throat, and two nights of exposure without sleep had affected his chest, too. Johnny Lister could not help feeling sorry for the young fellow; but when Johnny glanced at Inspector Catchpole, he saw an expression of half-contemptuous disbelief on that worthy's face. Johnny could not altogether blame him, for nine murderers out of ten insist that they have been convicted on false evidence—and they invariably accuse some highly placed individual. When they go to the gallows, they sometimes repent at the last moment, and confess—but when they are reprieved, and in prison, they go on maintaining their innocence, sticking to the old story until it becomes monotonous.

It almost seemed as though Hatherton was able to read Inspector Catchpole's mind, for he suddenly braced himself up, and looked at the faces about him with a return of that earlier flash of defiance.

"You think it's a fairy tale, don't you?" he said bitterly. "God knows it's too late for me to hope for any kind of justice now that Parsloe's dead. So why should I lie? That dirty hound turned the jury against me, I tell you. It was Parsloe who killed poor old Easton. He was the murderer. But he was also a rich man with a title, and Easton's partner. I was nobody but a private secretary, and it must have been easy to frame me. My God! It must have been a nasty shock for Parsloe when he heard that my sentence had been commuted to penal servitude for life. He thought I was going to be hanged—he thought he was going to be rid of me. But I wasn't hanged."

"No, Hatherton, you weren't hanged," agreed Cromwell. "But you'd better realise that you're doing yourself a hell of a lot of harm right now. You're making it pretty plain that you hated Parsloe's guts . . ."

"You bet I hated his guts—and every other part of his damned filthy body!" interrupted Hatherton fiercely. "For God's sake, haven't you any sense, inspector? I only missed the gallows by a hair's breadth over Easton's death. Do you think I'd go through all that again by killing Parsloe? Justice played me a hell of a filthy trick three years ago . . . Justice!" he added bitterly. "If that wasn't a raw deal, what was it? All I wanted to do last night, as I told you before, was to smash Parsloe's face in—to take him by the throat and choke him until he confessed that it was he who had murdered Easton . . . You don't believe me, of course. I didn't expect you to believe me. All I'm doing is to tighten another rope around my neck."

"Let's get back to last night," said Ironsides patiently. "I can't quite get the picture. Parsloe was driving along the main road, and you were on a motor-bike, a couple of meadows away, on a rural bye-lane. How did you know anything about the crash?"

"I knew about it, because I heard it. I was riding along that little lane when I saw the headlights of a car across the meadows, and I knew the car must be travelling along a parallel road. I stopped, of course . . ."

"Why of course?"

"Because I'm not too familiar with these lanes, and I thought it possible that the two roads might converge a bit farther up—and I didn't want to come into contact with that car."

"That's reasonable. Go on."

"Well, just as I stopped I heard a dull kind of crash and then silence. Knowing the condition of the roads, I guessed that the car had skidded and gone into the ditch."

"H'm! Yes. Very interesting," said Ironsides grimly. "And you were so concerned about the misfortunes of a fellow motorist that you promptly trotted across the meadows with the idea of rendering first-aid? Not good enough, my lad. A hunted man like you—an escaped convict—doesn't go dashing to the help of people he particularly wants to avoid."

"Don't you think I have any decent feelings at all?" retorted Hatherton. "When you hear a crash, it's an instinctive feeling to rush to the spot . . ."

"Stick to that story if you want to—but I'm telling you again, it's not good enough," jerked Cromwell. "Now, if you had known that Parsloe was in the car I could understand your anxiety to get to him—and I can understand, too, that you'd be willing to take the extra risk. But you told us, a few minutes ago, that you *didn't* know Parsloe was in the car. As far as you were concerned, he was a perfect stranger. He might have been anybody—even a police officer. Now, think carefully, Hatherton. Why did you go to that car?"

Maurice Hatherton shrugged.

"After the crash there was silence, as I said," he muttered gruffly. "I listened, but I couldn't hear voices . . . I couldn't hear anything. Not a movement. You want me to be frank, and I'll be frank. I thought the motorist, whoever he was, had hurt himself so badly in the crash that he was stunned—and it occurred to me that there might be a suit-case, or something like that, strapped to the grid."

"Now," said Ironsides, "we're getting somewhere." "What I needed more than anything else was a change of clothing," said the prisoner, glaring. "I knew the police had a description of me. The very overcoat I was wearing when they arrested me was taken from the back of a parked car in a village street. I wanted something different."

"This sounds more like the real thing, Hatherton," said the chief inspector. "I'm glad you dropped that 'succouring a fellow motorist' nonsense. It didn't ring true. Your real object was to get yourself a new outfit, wasn't it?"

"I'd like you to be a hunted man for just twenty-four hours, inspector—and then you'd understand better," retorted the other tensely. "I was afraid that Parsloe would have been warned that I'd escaped from prison—afraid, too, that you people had furnished him with a description of me. If I could

get hold of completely different clothes it would help . . . Well, anyway, I ran across the meadow—and there was Parsloe dead, lying half in and half out of that ditch."

He pressed his clenched knuckles to his head.

"I recognised him at once. Parsloe—dead! The man I had come to see. Every chance I ever had, or thought of having, gone! For with Parsloe dead I hadn't an earthly hope of clearing my name."

"About the body. Did you examine it?"

"No. I saw he was dead at once."

"Did you touch him?"

"I touched his head . . . that was enough." Hatherton shivered. "It was very queer. He was cold. Horribly cold. I wondered how he could have got so cold in such a short space of time. But, of course, I realised afterwards that he had been driving through that frosty air in an open car."

"H'm! I see," mused Ironsides. "You gave a hint, at the beginning, that somebody else might have been there. Why did you say that?"

"I thought I saw a man on a bicycle, riding away into the darkness. But I can't be sure. It was only a shadowy glimpse, and I may have been mistaken. I hadn't time for much else, because I saw the headlights of a car coming, and I had to run back across the meadow."

"That was our car, Hatherton," said Cromwell. "I think we know the rest. You didn't start up your engine because you were afraid we should hear it. Then you found out that we were following your footprints across the meadow and you thought it about time to be moving on."

"That's right," said the prisoner listlessly. "There's nothing more I can say. You don't believe half what I have said, in any case—and I'll swear to God it's the truth. I didn't kill Parsloe—he's the last man in the world I wanted to kill, because his death finishes me completely. I've got to serve my life's sentence . . ."

His voice shook so much that he ceased speaking. Cromwell sat for some moments pulling at a cold pipe and tapping his fingertips on the desk.

"All right, Hatherton," he said, rising to his feet. "I suppose you'll be willing to sign this statement?"

"Yes, I'll sign it."

Soon afterwards he did so, and was taken back to the cells.

"Well?" asked Inspector Catchpole.

"I don't quite know what to do with the young feller," said Ironsides. "Do you?"

"Why, of course I know what to do with him, sir," said Catchpole, in surprise. "There's only one thing to do—and that's obvious. Charge him with murder, and . . ."

"What's your idea of what happened last night?" interrupted Cromwell casually. "I'd like your opinion."

"As I see it, sir, there are two likely theories," replied the stout inspector. "Most of this statement, here, is a tissue of lies, as we expected. But it's possible Hatherton told the truth up to a point. He *may* have been motor-cycling along that little lane, and he may have heard Sir Kenneth's car crash into the ditch. All right. What did he do then? He went to the car to see if he could find any clothes, and found Parsloe injured and unconscious. Do you get that situation, sir?"

"You tell me," said Ironsides.

"There was this dangerous young murderer face to face with the man whose evidence had convicted him," said Catchpole, bending forward over his desk and placing his fat hands on the blotting pad. "What happened? Why, Hatherton flew into a blind rage and smashed the front of Parsloe's head in—kicked it in for all we know. He murdered Parsloe in the spot, then flew into a panic and bolted."

"Not bad," commented Cromwell. "And the other theory?"

"Well, I think the other theory is a lot nearer the truth," replied Catchpole. "Here's what I think happened. Hatherton drove straight to Higham Top, and arrived there just as Sir Kenneth Parsloe was starting out in his car. And it's very likely that he heard Sir Kenneth and the butler talking about Dr. Trumper, of Lower Martin . . ."

"Did Sir Kenneth and the butler talk about Dr. Trumper of Lower Martin?" jerked Ironsides abruptly.

"I don't know . . ."

"Then, for the love of Pete, don't put in a lot of guesswork," snapped the Scotland Yard man. "Unless you're damned careful, inspector, you'll soon be warping the facts to fit your theory. Well, go on."

"I'm assuming," said Catchpole, with ruffled dignity, "that Hatherton *did* know Sir Kenneth's destination; so he hopped on his motor-bike, shot off along that parallel lane, and crossed the meadows at the nearest spot. Then he waited in ambush for his victim to come along . . ."

"He must have been pretty slippery."

"That's understood. He had to be slippy. Sir Kenneth was driving cautiously, owing to the bad roads. I dare say Hather-ton got there with only a minute to spare. When he stepped out into the road Parsloe applied his brakes so suddenly that he skidded into the ditch. He was thrown out, and Hather-ton finished him off."

"That sounds like the real thing to me, sir," remarked Sergeant Root admiringly.

"It's only a theory—but at least it covers all the facts," said the inspector. "And it's no good blinking those facts, Mr. Cromwell. What does Hather-ton say in this statement of his?" He fumbled among the papers. "Here we are . . . 'I hated his guts and every other part of his damned filthy body.' And this—'All I wanted to do last night was to smash Parsloe's face in, and take him by the throat . . .'" The fool gives himself away completely. Every warder in his section at Dartmoor, too, knows that the one thought in his mind was to escape and get at Sir Kenneth Parsloe. Seems to me the only thing to do is to charge him with the murder and have him brought before the local bench. I'll ask for a remand . . ."

"Easy—easy," interrupted Cromwell, shaking his head. "No need for all that hurry, Catchpole. Want my advice? Then leave Hather-ton where he is. Don't charge him with anything. He's an escaped convict and in due course an escort will come along and take him back to Dartmoor."

"But he murdered a man in this district . . ."

"I wonder!" said Ironsides grimly. "Do just as you like, Catchpole. You needn't take my advice unless you like—but I'm not offering it a second time."

Inspector Catchpole took it.

CHAPTER SIX

BROTHER PHILIP

A TELEPHONE message came through from Higham Top requesting Mr. Cromwell's presence as soon as possible; and as the business with Hather-ton was concluded, the dour Scotland Yard man wasted no time in answering the call. Catchpole thought it advisable to go along, too. Beale opened the door for them.

"Mr. Dinglewell is in the library, sir," said Beale. "He would like to see you at once."

"All right—don't trouble to escort us, Beale," said Ironsides. "This is no time for formalities. Oh, by the way . . . There's something I want to ask you. Did you have any conversation with your master last night on these front steps, just as he was setting off for Dr. Trumper's?"

"No, sir."

"Here, what do you mean?" broke in Catchpole, with wheezy indignation. "That's not what you told me before breakfast."

"The poor master did not leave by the front door, sir," explained Beale sombrely. "As he was using the Wolseley, he went straight out through the side door to the small garage—the Wolseley was always kept locked up in the small garage, which is quite separate from the big garage. I heard the car coming round from the back, so I opened the side door and called out to Sir Kenneth."

"Did you shout?"

"Well, I spoke loudly, sir, so that my voice could be heard above the noise of the engine, which Sir Kenneth was apt to race when he was in low gear."

"What did you say to him?" asked Cromwell.

"I told him that the roads were very bad, sir, and asked him to be careful."

"Did you say anything about Lower Martin?"

"I may have mentioned Lower Martin, sir," said the butler, puzzled by these questions. "Yes, I think I asked him to be particularly careful of the corner just at the bottom of the hill near Lower Martin bridge."

"And you shouted?" said Catchpole, with a sly glance at Ironsides. "There you are, Mr. Cromwell. What did I tell you? If Hatherton had been lurking about on the drive, he could have heard every word of that conversation."

"Fair enough," said the chief inspector mildly. "But it's still guesswork. You've no evidence that Hatherton *was* lurking about on the drive. It wouldn't be a bad idea, Catchpole, for you to get some men on the job—have them search the drive and the parkland and the lanes all round this property. It's still freezing hard, and the snow's frozen. Hatherton could only have come here by motor-bike, and if he came, he must have left tracks."

"I'll get some men on the job right away, sir," wheezed

Catchpole. "I wouldn't mind betting a month's salary they find plenty of traces of Hatherton . . ."

The library door opened, and Mr. Dinglewell looked out.

"What's the matter with Beale?" said the lawyer, with flustered irritability. "I told him to bring you to me the instant you arrived."

"It wasn't Beale's fault," said Ironsides. "Coming now. Yes, you too, Johnny. No need for you to hang about in the hall."

"I have something to show you, gentlemen," continued Mr. Dinglewell, as they entered the library. "A telegram—from Philip. He'll be here within a very short time."

"Well, well!" murmured Cromwell. "Already?"

"You don't seem surprised."

"I'm not a bit surprised. But I should have been surprised if you *hadn't* had a telegram from Philip. Morning, Dr. Trumper. Don't look so unfriendly."

Dr. Benjamin Trumper, who was standing by the big fireplace, replied frankly:

"I look unfriendly, sir, because I *am* unfriendly," he said curtly. "I think you are making an unnecessary fuss over a perfectly straightforward case of accidental death, and your presence in this house of mourning does not meet with my approval."

"Here's the telegram, Mr. Cromwell," said the lawyer, hastily intervening. "Philip is staying at the Dorchester Hotel . . . He saw the reports of his brother's tragic death in this morning's papers, and he says he is catching the nine forty-five train from Waterloo. That means he will be arriving at Higham St. Andrew within the next half hour."

"Splendid!" said Cromwell, with an enigmatical wrinkling of his features. "I shall be very interested to meet Sir Philip Parsloe. Yes, sir. With your permission I'll go to the station myself."

He might have added that he would meet the new baronet at Higham St. Andrew station without any permission. He further suggested that the late Sir Kenneth's big saloon should be used for the short journey, complete with Edwards, the chauffeur.

"Nice car, this," commented Cromwell, as they went gliding along the snowy road. "I thought Sir Kenneth didn't like closed cars?"

"He liked them at one time, but of recent years he grew to hate them," replied Mr. Dinglewell. "Parsloe was like that

... A bit erratic . . . But, of course, he always maintained a big closed car for the benefit of any guests he might have. For a year, at least, he has done most of his own driving, and he has always used the Wolseley tourer."

"About a year, eh?" mused Cromwell.

"It might be a little over, or a little less—I can't quite remember," said the lawyer. "While he was away on holiday in Scotland he used a friend's open car, and got to like it so much that he swore he would never use any other car. I don't believe he's used this saloon once in the last six months."

Inspector Catchpole was beginning to form the opinion that Bill Cromwell was a garrulous and inquisitive old jackass. There seemed to be no point in these questions—unless, of course, Cromwell had got a theory of his own which he was keeping to himself . . . And now and again, it must be admitted, Catchpole had an uneasy feeling that there were some points in this case which he had missed.

The train came in a few minutes after the little party had reached the quiet country station. Only two passengers alighted—one of them a lady. The other was quite obviously the new squire of Higham St. Andrew. A biggish, comfortably built middle-aged man of straight and soldierly bearing, dressed in a warm tweed suit, with a raincoat over his arm and a small valise in his hand.

"Parsloe's brother, without a doubt," murmured Mr. Dinglewell, as he moved forward. "I should have known him in a crowd. The family resemblance is striking."

"But you've met before, haven't you?" asked Cromwell.

"Not since Philip was a mere boy."

The lawyer removed his glove and extended his hand as he went to meet the new arrival. Inspector Catchpole, eyeing Sir Philip Parsloe with interest, saw very little in common between this alert, clean-shaven stranger and the bearded corpse which lay in the death-room at Higham Top. Cromwell, however, noted the resemblance at once. The brothers, in their younger days, must have been very much alike.

"Sir Philip Parsloe?" said Mr. Dinglewell briskly. "I am Mr. Horace Dinglewell, of Dinglewell, Foote and Dinglewell, your late brother's legal advisers. I am sorry that we could not meet under happier circumstances."

"Sounds funny—'Sir Philip,'" said the new baronet, with a wry smile. "You're the first man who has addressed me in that way, Mr. Dinglewell. I have been 'Mr. Parsloe' for so long that it'll take me some time to get used to the new form

of address. I seem to have some vague memory of putting ink in your coffee one morning, in my father's time. A good many years ago."

"Yes, it's quite a long time since you were at Higham Top, Sir Philip," agreed the lawyer. "I don't recall the incident you mention, but I can well believe it happened. Your unhappy brother was fond of practical joking, too, in his younger days."

It was all very polite and correct—and just a little strained. Parsloe, after retrieving his hand from Mr. Dinglewell's grip, glanced inquiringly at the others.

"Quite a reception party," he remarked. "I take it, Mr. Dinglewell, that these gentlemen are with you?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Forgive me. Let me introduce Chief Inspector Cromwell, of Scotland Yard," said the lawyer hastily. "Inspector Catchpole, of the County Police, Sergeant Lister. . . . No, he's still in the car."

Sir Philip Parsloe was looking very surprised.

"Scotland Yard—County Police!" he exclaimed. "What's all this? I'm pleased to meet a celebrated man like yourself, Mr. Cromwell," he went on, as he shook hands with Ironsides, "but I'm damned if I can fit you into this picture."

There was an expression of inquiry in his cheerful, chubby face. He was of that type which is described as "a man of the world"—cool, complete master of himself, and thoroughly likeable. He rather reminded Ironsides of one or two notorious confidence men he had met up with in the course of his career. Sir Philip had that same charming, disarming attractiveness which is the stock-in-trade of the successful "con" man. Not, of course, that this fact mitigated against Sir Philip in any way, for your true con-man's principal asset is the air of breezy honesty which surrounds him like a halo. . . . No, Ironsides was merely remembering that this man, according to the family lawyer, had for years lived by his wits. . . .

"The fact is, sir, I am here more or less unofficially," said Cromwell, with a shrug. "I can't quite say the same about Inspector Catchpole."

"Which can mean only one thing," said the astonished Sir Philip. "You are here to inquire into the death of my brother. But why? According to the reports in the papers my brother was killed in a car smash. It's not usual for the local police to call in Scotland Yard in cases of accidental death, is it?"

"No, sir," agreed Cromwell bluntly. "But we have some reason to believe that your brother was murdered."

"Good God! That's fantastic . . . Murdered!" Parsloe looked horrified. "Kenneth murdered! But who on earth . . . Forgive me, but all this sounds quite incredible."

"Yes, yes, I agree," put in Mr. Dinglewell hurriedly. "But is it necessary for us to stand on this station platform discussing the matter? It appears, Sir Philip, that an escaped convict was on the scene of the accident last night and the matter is complicated by the fact that this wretched man had uttered threats against your brother. . . . Nothing in it, I believe, but the matter has to be cleared up."

"I see." The new baronet looked thoughtful, with a light of understanding in his eyes. "That murder case, two or three years ago, eh? Kenneth's partner was bumped off by somebody, wasn't he? I was in Hollywood at the time, trying my luck in the movies. . . ." He smiled wryly. "I never got beyond being an extra. . . . Kenneth mentioned, in one of his letters, that this infernal murderer had threatened to get him."

"You mean, your brother was alarmed?" asked Ironsides.

"Quite the opposite. He seemed to treat the matter with contempt, and even amusement," said the other. "And why not? The fellow had been convicted, and was serving a life sentence." He frowned regretfully as they moved towards the exit. "I don't like the sound of this. Bad enough to get the news that my brother had been killed stone dead in a car crash . . . This suggestion that he might have been murdered is . . . well, nasty."

"I entirely agree with you, sir," said the lawyer. "It is very nasty, indeed, and I hope that Mr. Cromwell will soon satisfy himself that there is nothing in the suggestion. Murder has a very ugly sound, and we can well do without that kind of publicity."

Just as they were about to enter the car Sir Philip turned to Mr. Dinglewell with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"I like to get things straight at the outset," he said frankly. "I've inherited a big estate and a large income—right out of a clear sky. I'm not going to begin by wearing a sad face, and shedding a lot of crocodile's tears. So don't expect me to go about the place covered in sackcloth and ashes. I can't mourn much over Kenneth's death, and I'm not going to pretend to do so. As long as that's understood. . . ."

"Of course—of course. . . ."

"Kenneth and I have been strangers, more or less, for over twenty years," continued the other. "It's over fifteen years since we met. His favourite pastime was cursing me, and my

favourite pastime was cursing him. He thought I was no good, and I thought he was a self-righteous, stiff-necked humbug. During recent months he seems to have softened that flinty heart of his, and the financial help he sent me tended to heal the old breach. But I still think somebody must have been getting at him, or that advancing age was making him weak-minded."

"Well, sir, there's nothing like being frank," said the lawyer, with a twinkle. "Perhaps it's just as well that there should be no false sentiment. I would remind you, however, that you are going into a house of mourning, and I am sure that you will conduct yourself accordingly."

"I won't start singing about the place, if that's what you mean—not, at least, until after the funeral," replied Sir Philip candidly. "By the way, I haven't shown you any of my credentials yet, Mr. Dinglewell. It is nice to be accepted at my face value like this, but . . ."

"I think I'm perfectly safe," chuckled the lawyer, inwardly relieved that the new baronet was treating the situation so sensibly. "You are so obviously a Parsloe—your resemblance to your brother is so striking—that the examination of your credentials will be a mere formality."

Sir Philip produced a wallet.

"My passport . . . my bankbook, which doesn't make particularly happy reading . . . two or three letters from Kenneth . . . I haven't got my birth certificate on me at the moment. . . ."

"Really, Sir Philip, all this is hardly necessary," protested Mr. Dinglewell. "Can't we leave these matters until we get to the house?"

"Why, yes, of course," replied Parsloe, with a dry chuckle. "A very different home-coming from the one I expected. Yes, I had already made up my mind to visit Kenneth—I arrived in London from the continent yesterday, put up at the Dorchester, and this morning the first thing I read in the newspapers is that Kenneth is dead."

"So you intended to see your brother, sir?" asked Cromwell.

"That's why I came to England. He'd been so decent of late that I thought I'd better pop down and meet him face to face," replied Philip, with a shrug. "Not being a hypocrite, I'd better add that I was hoping to touch him for a further hundred, or so—while he was in the mood."

Mr. Dinglewell coughed discreetly, and started talking to

Parsloe about his long connection with the family, expressing a hope that the new baronet would entrust him with the conduct of his legal affairs. . . . Cromwell and Catchpole moved aside.

"That's what I call luck," wheezed Catchpole enviously.

"He plans to come down here to bite his brother's ear for a few hundreds, and now he's lord of all he surveys. Ordinarily, he couldn't have expected to inherit for twenty years."

Cromwell, apparently, was not listening.

"I wonder!" he said musingly.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"He says he arrived in London from the continent yesterday, eh?"

"Good lord! Don't you believe him?"

"I'm wondering, that's all."

"You're doing more than that, Mr. Cromwell—you're doubting his word," breathed the astonished inspector, with a half glance over his shoulder. "You don't think . . ."

"I don't think anything—yet."

Ironsides closed up like a clam—one of his most successful performances. He got into the car after Sir Philip, and Catchpole, much to Mr. Dinglewell's silent indignation, followed. There was no room for the lawyer at the back, so he had to take his seat in front, beside Johnny Lister.

Parsloe was as good as his word; he was making no pretence of shedding crocodile's tears. He lay back in his seat as comfortably as the bulk of Inspector Catchpole would permit, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette.

"A sombre home-coming, sir," remarked Catchpole.

"Eh? Well, yes, I suppose so." Sir Philip felt that common decency called for a little gravity. "Not that I have ever regarded Higham Top as my home. I lived there as a kid, naturally, but I was always the family black sheep after I got into a bit of trouble in London in my early twenties. The old man never really forgave me—and starchy Kenneth never seemed to be able to get off his high horse. . . . About this escaped convict chap. Do you seriously believe that he killed my brother? That the death wasn't accidental?"

"We've had a statement from young Hatherton, sir, but it's not very convincing," replied Catchpole. "Personally, I think he *did* kill your brother. Anyway, he was on the scene at the very time of the death. . . ."

"Hatherton. Yes, that's the name," said Sir Philip thoughtfully. "I remember now. . . . Vindictive young devil,

I recollect. Made threats against Kenneth from the dock, didn't he? Well, if he's guilty of this second crime, I hope you fellows will see that he doesn't slip his head out of the noose again. The man's a menace."

Bill Cromwell was not listening. A second or two earlier he had caught sight of something which gave him one of those rare thrills that so seldom enliven criminal investigation. Mostly, his work was dull and methodical—or so he always complained. But every once in a while there would be a high spot. He had touched a high spot now. It was one of those unlooked-for chances which occasionally crop up in the course of a difficult case, and it took Ironsides completely by surprise.

After a moment or two he gave Inspector Catchpole a quiet nudge. The latter half-glanced at him, failing to understand. Then he followed the silent direction of the Yard man's gaze—and was more puzzled still. Unless he was mistaken, Ironsides was looking down at the lower portion of Parsloe's left leg, which was crossed over his right knee . . . Then it occurred to Catchpole that the cuff, or turn-up, of the trouser was gaping a little. This was quite natural, seeing that Parsloe was sitting with his legs crossed . . .

"I don't see . . ." mumbled Catchpole, and then stopped. He was looking at two or three little hawthorn berries, quite red, which had lodged in the trouser turn-up. Catchpole gave his colleague a side glance. So what? his eyes said. The man had apparently been taking a walk in the country recently . . .

"Bit of a change for you, this, Sir Philip, eh?" remarked Cromwell, as though talking for the sake of making conversation. "Coming down into the country, I mean. Or have you been staying in some rural corner of the continent?"

Parsloe laughed.

"Rural corners, my friend, are not particularly attractive to me," he replied. "No, this is my first trip to the country for many a day. Paris . . . Rome . . . Monte Carlo. Always the best hotels I could afford. Country life has never appealed to me much . . ." He broke off and chuckled. "I suppose I had better make up my mind to get used to it if I'm to be a model country squire."

Inspector Catchpole felt startled. Ironsides, in that wily way of his, had tripped up the new baronet very ingeniously; he had caught Parsloe out in a deliberate and apparently unnecessary lie. If the man hadn't been walking in a country district, how had he got hawthorn berries in the turn-up of

his trousers? Such berries do not grow in city streets. Catchpole's interest in the newcomer was much increased.

When the big car turned into the drive of Higham Top, Sir Philip was leaning forward, looking out of the windows with animation.

"Yes, just the same," he murmured. "I used to climb that big chestnut—the end one—when I was a kid. See those stable roofs, just by the corner of the north wing? I remember, once, I climbed right to the top, and an ostler had to climb up to my rescue. . . . Nearly broke my neck that time. . . . Hallo! Who's the queer looking old blighter standing on the front steps?"

The car came to a standstill, and the queer looking old blighter moved eagerly forward and opened the door.

"My name is Trumper, sir—Dr. Benjamin Trumper," he said, greeting Sir Philip with enthusiasm. "This is a very great pleasure."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Sir Philip dryly.

"I was your brother's greatest friend for many years," continued Dr. Trumper. "He has talked about you so often that I seem to know you personally."

"And you're still willing to shake me by the hand?" asked Parsloe, as he got out of the car.

"Really, I fail to understand. . . ."

"It's no good trying to make jokes with Dr. Trumper, sir," said Ironsides. "He doesn't understand that sort of thing. No sense of humour, I'm afraid."

"I hardly thought," said Dr. Trumper stiffly, "that this was an occasion for joking."

"All right," said Parsloe. "Sorry, Dr. Trumper. You win. I only meant that Kenneth was not likely to say anything good about me. For the greater part of our lives, from boyhood onwards, he regarded me as a cross between Dick Turpin and Jack-the-Ripper. I can't imagine him giving me a good build-up."

"But you are wrong, my dear sir—you are quite wrong," said the doctor quickly. "Admittedly, Sir Kenneth was somewhat bitter in the old days. . . . But he has recently undergone a complete change. . . ."

"And I'm damned if I can understand why," interrupted Parsloe frankly. "I wonder if you're the cause of it? If so, you're my best friend! During the last eight or nine months I've touched Ken for several very nice lump sums. And now. . . ." From the top step he looked out over the railings. "And now all this is mine. A car skids on a snowy road, and

I become master of this fine house and the surrounding estates. You never know whether fate is going to give you a wallop or a friendly slap on the back. Ken got the wallop, and I'm getting the friendly slap on the back. That's how it goes."

He walked into the handsome, spacious hall with evident interest. It was gloomy, for every available blind had been drawn down. Beale, looking very bishop-like and dignified, stood at attention, waiting to be introduced.

"I wonder," said Mr. Dinglewell, "if you would like to go upstairs at once and see your brother?"

"Must we keep up this pretence?" asked Sir Philip in a pained voice. "I suppose I shall have to take a look at Ken—a brother's duty and all that sort of thing—but I'm not looking forward to it. What I'd rather have right now is a long whisky and soda."

Mr. Dinglewell looked shocked, and Inspector Catchpole looked mildly surprised, and Beale, being a well-trained butler, remained as unemotional as a wooden image. Bill Cromwell was grinning quietly to himself. This honest treatment of the situation by Sir Philip appealed to him.

"Give me time, at least, to have a look round the place," continued the newcomer. "Then, too, there are certain formalities we must look into, Mr. Dinglewell. I'd like to present you with my credentials, to begin with. . . ."

"Quite—quite."

"The library, I seem to remember, is over here," said Parsloe, moving forward. "Ah, who's this? Oh, Beale is the name, is it? Fine. I hope, Beale, that you will continue in my service. I expect you know how to run the house a dashed lot better than I could run it."

"Thank you, sir," said Beale.

"To begin with, you can rally round with whisky and soda for everybody," said Sir Philip expansively. "Gentlemen, will you join me in the library?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THREE SUSPECTS

DR. TRUMPER wore an expression of disapproval and open displeasure as he entered the library in the wake of its new owner. Apparently, he did not know how to take Parsloe, and he seemed nervous and jumpy. He would have preferred, it seemed, for Sir Philip to act with more conventional decorum, and at least make a pretence of being sad.

"The inspector and I will only stay for a minute, sir," said Bill Cromwell, addressing the lawyer. "The inspector's got a lot of things to do. Important appointment . . . I don't know whether I shall be in the district for long—but I know at least one man who'll be glad to see the back of me."

"If you are referring to me, sir, I must agree with you," said Dr. Trumper coldly. "For your departure would mean that you have dropped this ridiculous suggestion that poor Parsloe was murdered."

Catchpole, who had no important appointment, wondered what Ironsides was getting at. They joined the others in a quick drink, and then excused themselves. Cromwell had no wish to be present during this purely legal get-together. Also, he had something to do that brooked of no delay.

Detective-Sergeant Johnny Lister, watching Ironsides cross the hall, was intrigued.

"Now we're off!" he said briskly.

"What do you mean—we're off?"

"You can't kid me, Old Iron," said Johnny. "Think I don't know that ferocious looking expression on your dial? You're on to something. Inspector, the old boy's on to something. I advise you to book a front row seat."

They went out to Johnny's car, and climbed in.

"Go to that place where the Wolseley crashed," said Cromwell shortly. "Any chance of there being much traffic over that road this morning, inspector?"

"Not much, sir. There's very little traffic, anyway. Not many motorists are venturing out. The roads are still very tricky. . . . I say, Mr. Cromwell, is this something to do with Sir Philip Parsloe? I can't say I'm very favourably impressed by the man. He might at least be decent about his brother's tragic finish."

"Now, there, we differ," growled Ironsides. "I admire the man for his open honesty. He never cared tuppence about his brother, and he'd be a sheer hypocrite if he went about with a face as long as a mile. Man alive, can't you understand that he's just come into a big fortune? He's not sad about his brother's death. He's glad."

"I say, sir . . ."

"Of course he's glad," snapped Cromwell. "I'd be glad in the same circumstances—only I doubt if I'd have the courage to show it so openly. This Philip is a caution. You can understand it, of course. . . . Younger son . . . knocking about all over the world, sometimes broke to the wide . . . never getting a real break. . . . Now he's on top. I wonder how much of it is genuine, and how much a carefully rehearsed act?"

"I don't think he was acting," said Catchpole, shaking his head. "If he *had* decided to act, surely he would have appeared sad and sombre?"

"That's what you think—but the blighter may be very subtle," retorted Ironsides. "I've seen too many men of his type to be fooled, inspector. He may be all right, or he may not. Time will show."

"Yes sir, and what about those red berries?"

"Red berries?" repeated Johnny, in surprise.

"While we were driving up from the station, Mr. Cromwell pointed out one or two red berries which had lodged in Parsloe's trouser turn-ups," explained Catchpole. "The funny thing is, Parsloe appeared to lie when Mr. Cromwell questioned him about walking in the country. I don't get it. Why do you think those berries are important, Mr. Cromwell?"

"Ask my assistant," said Ironsides sourly.

"Ask me?" said Johnny, startled. "What the hell do I know about red berries?"

"I thought as much—you're both as bad as one another," grunted the chief inspector. "The first thing a detective ought to learn is to use his eyes. How many times have I told you that, Johnny? You're both as blind as bats. You see things, but you don't observe them."

Johnny, with a backward sweep of his head from the driving seat, treated Inspector Catchpole to a wink.

"Just let him run on," he advised. "He has these outbursts now and again. This is what comes of reading Conan Doyle at night in bed. He fancies he's Sherlock Holmes and it amuses him to lecture me as though I were Dr. Watson."

"All right—be as funny as you like," grunted Cromwell. "But those little hawthorn berries in Parsloe's trouser turn-up may alter the whole case. Sneer at trifles all you like, Johnny, but sometimes they're damned important."

"I'm not sneering at you, sir, and I'd like to know what you're getting at," said the stout inspector, with some animation.

"Well, consider the facts," said Ironsides. "Parsloe is a man who has just come down from London, and he tells us that he's been living in big cities for months. This man, remember, suddenly inherits a title and a big fortune. His brother died last night—presumably by accident, but just as likely as the result of a homicidal blow. That's what appearances suggest, anyway. . . . And this man, this new Parsloe, who says he hasn't been into the country recently, has got hawthorn berries in his trousers. He doesn't look the kind of man to be careless with his clothes, and to leave them unbrushed—so it's pretty obvious that the berries are a recent acquisition. And they didn't drop into his trouser turn-ups in Piccadilly!"

There were many questions which Catchpole wanted to ask, but they had just arrived at the scene of the smash. The Wolseley tourer had been removed by the police, and no living soul was in sight. The hard frost persisted, and the countryside was still covered by the light carpet of snow. There had been very little traffic, for the car marks on the snowy surface were not confused, and the track left by the Wolseley, and the skid marks, were still quite clear.

"There!" said Ironsides, pointing.

He had walked to the grass verge, and was looking down into the frozen ditch, where the snow was completely obliterated by the footprints of the men who had removed the damaged car.

Johnny Lister and Catchpole, following the direction of Cromwell's pointing finger, saw a smallish hawthorn bush growing in the hedge—and it was clustered with little red berries.

"Ye gods!" said Johnny. "Not a yard from the spot where the dead man was lying."

"And they're the same berries!" said Catchpole.

"The same *kind* of berries," amended Ironsides. "The inference is that Sir Philip Parsloe brushed against that bush and some of the berries fell off and lodged in his trouser cuff. But it's only circumstantial evidence, inspector."

Don't forget that. There are plenty of other hawthorn bushes."

"But I thought you meant . . ."

"I do mean it. I believe he was here. But it's no good putting that kind of evidence before a jury. As far as our own inquiries are concerned, this discovery is going to help a lot. We can start off on a new line and see where it leads to."

He went down into the ditch and confirmed his suggestion that some of the berries had recently fallen off the bush. Quite a few of the tiny red things were lying in the bottom of the ditch.

"Here, wait a minute, sir," wheezed Catchpole, in a startled voice. "All this looks very queer, but it's impossible. I can see what you're getting at, but it just can't be."

"Why can't it?"

"You're suggesting that Sir Philip Parsloe was on this very spot last night—presumably at the time of his brother's death."

"Well?"

"Well, you know as well as I do, sir, that he wasn't here," said Catchpole, exasperated. "Nobody was here. What's more, nobody *could* have been here. You saw the road as clearly as I did. Covered with snow from ditch to ditch. Not a footprint anywhere. If Sir Philip had been here, how the devil did he get away without leaving footprints?"

"Answer that one, Old Iron," suggested Johnny.

"The only footprints we saw were Hatherton's footprints in the meadow," continued Catchpole. "They're still there—together with our own. There weren't any other footprints in that meadow last night. What did Parsloe do? Fly away?"

"No need for you to get sarcastic, inspector," said Ironsides mildly. "No need to get hot under the collar, either. It was Hatherton himself who suggested a possible solution to this little problem. Remember what he said? He had a vague idea that he saw somebody moving away from the car into the darkness . . . somebody on a bicycle. . . ."

"On a bicycle!" puffed Catchpole indignantly. "Good lord, Mr. Cromwell, you're not sucked in by that yarn, are you? It was only another of Hatherton's lies. And a whacking great obvious lie—or there'd be the marks of bicycle tyres in the snow."

"Yes, so there would," agreed Cromwell grimly. "You think I came here to look for that hawthorn bush, don't you?"

Well, I didn't. I knew it was there. I saw it last night. I came to look for those bicycle tyre marks."

"What's the good of looking for them now, sir—twelve hours afterwards?" exploded Catchpole. "If they weren't there last night, how the devil can they be there now? You *know* they weren't there last night. . . ."

"Last night," said Cromwell, "I didn't know what I know now. I made up my mind to come and have a look at this road immediately after we had left Hatherton. But Parsloe's arrival delayed me . . . and those red berries in Parsloe's trousers made the whole thing more interesting. It doesn't matter—the tracks haven't been obliterated by other traffic."

"Yes, but what tracks?" yelled Catchpole, purple in the face with exasperation. "There aren't any cycle tracks. There weren't any cycle tracks last night. . . ."

Ironsides interrupted rudely, muttering something about Catchpole putting a sock in it. He walked along the road, following the skid marks of the Wolseley, until he came to a place where the car's tracks were undisturbed and clearly defined. He followed them along slowly, crouching low. He had not covered more than ten yards before he halted, and Johnny Lister saw a slight quiver pass over his body—and the sergeant was reminded of a bloodhound when it picks up the scent.

"Well, well!" murmured Ironsides softly.

He dropped on to his knees into the snow, examining the tracks at close range. Johnny and Catchpole bent over wonderingly.

"If you wouldn't be so fussy about your clothes, you two, you'd get on your knees like me and have a good look," snapped Cromwell. "Come on. It's worth looking at."

"Yes, sir, but what?" asked Catchpole. "I know what the track of a Dunlop tyre looks like. . . ."

"Dunlop tyres are deservedly popular," grunted Ironsides. "Get down on your knees, man, and you'll see *another* Dunlop track inside this one."

With much grunting and puffing, the local inspector got down on to his knees. He looked very closely at the frozen ground. Johnny Lister did the same.

"He's right, inspector," said Johnny, in an astonished voice. "There, look" He pointed. "The track of a bicycle tyre, superimposed over the track of the car tyre . . . Look. You can see it distinctly a little farther on."

"Why, so I can!" ejaculated Catchpole. "Well I'm damned! This is a surprise."

"You may be surprised, but I'm not," said Cromwell tartly, as he rose to his feet.

He pulled out his pipe, and rammed tobacco into the bowl. His eyes, under their shaggy brows, were full of a quiet satisfaction. For once, his face looked almost attractive. He was so pleased that Johnny would not have been surprised if he had ventured a few dance steps.

"A bicycle!" said Catchpole wonderingly. "Somebody was here on a bicycle! Here, but wait a minute. . . . This bicycle track may have been made to-day. . . ."

"It was made last night," interrupted Ironsides. "It was made before the snow stopped. In some places it's half obliterated by freshly fallen snow—which is the main reason I didn't see it last night, when I wasn't looking for anything of the kind. It's difficult enough to see in full daylight."

"This makes a difference, sir."

"You can bet your back teeth it makes a difference," said the chief inspector emphatically. "The man who rode this bike was anxious—desperately anxious—to conceal his movements. He didn't want anybody to know that he had been on the scene. Otherwise he would have ridden away openly, caring nothing about the tracks he left in the snow. We've got proof of two things, inspector. The man on the bike was a skilful rider—and he had an urgent reason for concealing his movements."

Catchpole pulled at his grizzled moustache.

"This means we've got to start all over again, sir," he said, frowning. "I see what you mean now. You said that somebody else might have murdered Parsloe, and not Hatherton. . . ."

"Steady. I never said that," interrupted Ironsides. "I said that while Hatherton was probably innocent of murder, there was a good chance that Parsloe had not been killed by accident."

"What's the difference? If Hatherton didn't murder him, and if he wasn't killed by accident, it stands to reason that somebody else must have murdered him."

"No, it doesn't."

"Here, I don't get this. . . . Gosh, you're not suggesting that Parsloe committed suicide?"

"I'm damned certain he didn't commit suicide."

"I wish you'd be a bit clearer, sir," objected Catchpole,

with a helpless glance at Johnny Lister. "If Parsloe didn't die by accident, and he didn't commit suicide, he must have been murdered. And if Hatherton didn't murder him, he was murdered by somebody else. That's obvious."

"Take my advice, inspector, and save yourself a lot of headache by leaving the old blighter alone," said Johnny Lister. "He's in one of his exasperating moods. He's spotted something that we poor mutts have missed, and he won't talk."

Catchpole disliked being referred to as "a poor mutt."

"I don't think I've missed anything, young man," he said tartly. "I can understand what Mr. Cromwell is driving at. It's startling. Those hawthorn berries . . . It's pretty certain that Philip Parsloe was on this spot last night, and he must have been in the car with his brother. The bicycle was in the car, too. The inference is clear enough; after Sir Kenneth's death, Philip rode away on that bike."

"Taking care to steer the jigger in one of the car tracks," nodded Johnny Lister. "He thought the smash would be looked upon as an accident, with only one or two rural bobbies on the job. He never anticipated a careful investigation by one of the Yard's Big Five—and that's where he's going to come unstuck."

Ironsides nodded complacently.

"Something in that, Johnny," he agreed. "The people who engineered this pretty little picnic didn't bargain for us being on the scene. If it comes to that, we didn't bargain for it ourselves, either. We were here by chance, more or less. But that's how things happen in this uncertain life. We're up against a tough proposition, inspector. There was a conspiracy of some kind, and the instigators of it arranged everything so that the local cops would take one look and say 'accidental death.' Get it? No searching police investigation—only a few formal inquiries by stolid old Sergeant Root."

"I'm going back to Higham Top," said Catchpole vehemently. "I'm going to ask this new Parsloe some pointed questions. . . ."

"Better not do that, inspector," advised Cromwell. "Where's your evidence? You'll only frighten the bird. The best thing to do, right away, is to get a photographer on the job and take photographs of these tyre tracks. Then you'd better do a little quiet searching for a bicycle . . . Leave Philip alone for the time being."

"You really think so, sir?" said Catchpole, who now had a

great respect for the Scotland Yard man's sagacity. "Well, perhaps you're right. I'm as certain as you are—now—that Sir Kenneth Parsloe was murdered. . . ."

"I haven't said I'm certain of it."

"But you are, sir. As I see it, there are two suspects. The evidence against one is as strong as the evidence against the other. Take Hatherton. Here's a murderer, a man escaped from prison, who has sworn vengeance against Sir Kenneth. He was on the spot last night, and could have done the killing. Then there's this smooth-tongued, airy-fairy brother, Philip. He was on the spot, too. He could have done the killing. He might have done it only a minute or two before Hatherton arrived. . . . Hatherton said he saw a shadowy figure vanishing into the darkness on a bicycle . . . I say," said Catchpole, with a start. "That young feller's story is beginning to hang together."

"I never doubted his story," retorted Cromwell. "I'd sooner believe Hatherton than Parsloe. He impressed me very favourably, Mr. Catchpole. I've taken plenty of statements from suspected men, and I've got to know when a man is lying, and when he's telling the truth. Young Hatherton was open and straightforward. Parsloe, on the other hand, lied to us ten minutes after we met him. Yes, the problem is beginning to look pretty. One of our suspects has a vengeance motive, and the other has a motive of *gain*—and nice pickings at that. Parsloe said he arrived in London from the continent last night. A lie. He was here, on this spot last night. We can't actually prove it yet, but there's plenty of time."

"What do you suggest I do, sir?"

"Play dumb," advised Cromwell, giving the stout inspector a searching glance. "It ought to be pretty easy. . . . Don't worry about Parsloe. He thinks he's sitting pretty—and we've got to make him think he'll keep on sitting that way. He won't take fright and bolt. He's come down to Higham Top to live the life of a country gentleman and enjoy his inheritance. . . . Or am I just kidding you?" he added, with one of his rare grins. "As I said before, inspector, there's a hell of a lot more in this case than you realise."

"Well, I wish you'd be a bit more frank, sir," grumbled Catchpole. "If you *do* know something, you might take me into your confidence."

"That's just the point. I don't know anything. I've only got a hunch," replied Cromwell. "And, as my assistant can tell you, it's not my way to share my hunches with anybody

else. If they turn out right—why, then I can start talking. But if they turn out wrong I can keep mum and save myself from looking like a damned fool. We haven't enough evidence to arrest Parsloe on any charge. We haven't enough evidence to arrest Hatherton, even. So what must you do, my friend? Detain Hatherton for a day or two, and give Parsloe some rope."

"Yes, I can see that—but what am I going to do?"

— "Play dumb, as I told you. Bustle about, pretending to be busy on side issues that don't matter a cuss. By the way, don't forget that there's a third suspect."

"A third suspect! But who . . . Good lord, you don't mean Dr. Trumper?"

"Who else?"

"But that's ridiculous, sir. Trumper's got a water-tight alibi. You said so yourself."

"He wasn't on the actual scene of the crime—because he was with us on the steps of his own house at about that time," agreed Cromwell. "But his behaviour has been unsatisfactory from the start—as you ought to know without being told. How do we know that he wasn't in the conspiracy? Remember his eagerness to give the death certificate without any formalities? Remember how jumpy he was when I was examining the body? He's been insistent—a damned sight too insistent—that Parsloe was killed by accident."

"Oh, my gosh!" said Catchpole. "Three of them, now! Well, one thing's certain—Dr. Trumper could not have been working in collaboration with young Hatherton. But, by God, there's no reason why he couldn't have been working in collaboration with Philip Parsloe. Parsloe gets a fortune, and Trumper gets twenty-five thousand quid. That's motive enough for anybody."

"You're telling me?" grunted Cromwell. "Well, we've seen what we came to see, and we're wasting time. We'll get back to the village, and you'd better arrange for those photographs. Johnny, I'm afraid you'll have to stay here for a bit." The operations were soon set in train, and after the photographs had been taken, Ironsides stated his intention of returning to Higham Top.

"We shall just be in time for lunch," he said complacently. "Not that I shall be able to eat much, with my dyspepsia. . . . No, I want to drop a hint or two to our genial friends that we've been wasting our time. Better let me do the talking, inspector."

"Don't worry, Mr. Cromwell. I'm not a fool. I won't put my foot in anything."

As Cromwell had anticipated, Sir Philip Parsloe insisted upon his visitors staying to lunch; indeed, he urged Cromwell to make Higham Top his headquarters for the investigation, and his cordiality was nice to see.

"That's very handsome of you, sir," said Ironsides, taking advantage of the opening. "But, as a matter of fact, I don't think I shall be here for long."

They were standing in the hall, preparatory to entering the dining-room, and at this point there was an interruption. Dr. Trumper and a stranger came downstairs together.

"Dr. Bristow, our police surgeon," whispered Catchpole, in Ironsides' ear.

Dr. Bristow was a fussy little man who had been put to some inconvenience by the journey to Higham Top, and he was in a hurry to get off. He had just examined the dead man.

"Yes, Mr. Cromwell, the injury is quite consistent with the facts as we know them," he said, after he had been introduced to the Scotland Yard man. "Skull badly crushed . . . No other serious injury, although I'm a bit puzzled by the appearance of the body . . . Some unusual features. . . ."

"Accounted for, no doubt, by the severe frost," said Dr. Trumper. "I noticed the same peculiarities. Poor Parsloe was killed instantaneously and he was lying in that freezing air for some time—many hours, in fact, before he was removed from the ditch. Frost plays queer tricks with dead human tissue."

"Well, I'd hardly say that," remarked the police surgeon. "But there's no doubt that the crushing of the skull caused instantaneous death. Parsloe, I understand, was thrown violently out of the car and was found with his head near a frozen bank. He must have hit the bank with great force. . . . A pity. He was a fine, healthy man."

A few minutes later Dr. Bristow took his departure, and the others went to lunch.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," said Sir Philip, as he took his place at the head of the table. "Your police surgeon is satisfied that my brother was accidentally killed, Mr. Cromwell. What about that young devil, Hatherton, and your murder theory now?"

"We all make mistakes, sir," said Cromwell gloomily. "Inspector Catchpole and I have been talking things over,

and we're pretty sure that Dr. Trumper has been right all along."

"Well, that's very handsome of you," said Dr. Trumper, with some asperity.

"Had to be sure, sir," jerked Ironsides. "Can't blame us for doing our duty. If Hatherton hadn't actually been on the spot at the time there would have been no suggestion of murder. That young fellow's activities complicated things. Mr. Catchpole and I have been looking through that statement of his again. You remember, Hatherton made a statement this morning. . . ."

"Yes, you told us."

"He admitted coming here to have a quarrel with Sir Kenneth, but it seems to us that his story is clear cut and straightforward and consistent with the known facts," continued Cromwell glibly. "He was riding along a parallel road towards this place when he saw the lights of a car across the meadows. He stopped, and a minute later he heard a car crash into the ditch. When he got to the spot he found Sir Kenneth lying there, dead. I don't see any reason to doubt his story. . . ."

"He saw nobody else, then?" asked Sir Philip casually.

"Not a living soul."

"A good thing there was snow on the ground, eh? If anybody else had been there, he would have left footprints." Sir Philip helped himself to some vegetables. "I understand that the only marks on the road at the time were the tracks of Kenneth's car?"

"That's right, sir. Nobody else could have been there, and Hatherton's account of his own movements is pretty satisfactory. My job is more or less over—although the inspector, here, will have to put Hatherton's statement to a thorough investigation. But that's only a formality. It may take a day or two, but I don't suppose we shall need to trouble you, Sir Philip."

"And the funeral. . . .?"

"You can go ahead with the funeral arrangements as soon as you like," replied Ironsides readily.

He was conveying a forkful of food to his mouth at the moment, and he seemed to be concentrating all his attention on his plate; but he did not fail to notice the look of relief which swept over Dr. Benjamin Trumper's face like a warm flush. . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

OMINOUS INTERLUDE

BILL CROMWELL did not linger for long at Higham Top after the meal was over.

"Got to get back to town, sir," he explained, as he shook hands with the new baronet. "A bit irregular, my being here at all. Still, they'll expect me to make some sort of a report at the Yard. The inspector, here, will carry on—although there's precious little more to be done."

They were seen off by Sir Philip and Dr. Trumper, and the latter was at no pains to conceal his satisfaction.

"Of course, you didn't mean that about dropping out of the case, Mr. Cromwell," wheezed Catchpole, after the car had reached the road. "Just bluffing them, eh?"

"Yes; in accordance with the line of action we agreed to take," replied Ironsides. "We've left a precious pair behind at that house, inspector."

"Well, anyway, sir, that little talk of yours ought to have lulled them into a sense of false security. And that's what we want."

"Dinglewell . . . No need to bother your head about Dinglewell," said Cromwell. "He's all right. But the others . . . We shall have to go warily, inspector. We shall have to watch our step."

"Did you mean what you said about going up to the Yard, sir?"

"Yes. We'll drop you anywhere you like, and then shoot straight off. Lots of things to do at the Yard," explained Cromwell. "Make my report . . . have an uncomfortable ten minutes with my chief . . . and get some of our fellows into action making inquiries about Brother Philip. I'm not doubting that he stayed at the Dorchester last night—but he didn't get there until late. I'm more interested in his earlier movements. I'm going to get our chaps to check up on the passenger lists of every Channel steamer—and every cross-Channel air liner, too. Before to-night I mean to find out whether this man did actually cross from the continent yesterday . . ."

"But we know he didn't, sir."

"You and I may know it, but we've got to have proof," grunted Cromwell. "Listen, inspector. The Chief may want to keep me on this case. If so, I shall be back in this district to-night. It'll probably mean consulting your chief constable over the phone, but that won't be my affair. . . . If I do come back, there'll be some funny work to be done."

Johnny Lister, listening to this, smiled a quiet smile. He knew perfectly well that Ironsides had already made up his mind to come back; Ironsides was on to something sizzling hot, and he meant to push it along for all he was worth. Inspector Catchpole, however, was frankly puzzled.

"What do you mean—funny work?"

"Not so funny, perhaps," amended Cromwell. "Anyway, I'd like you to remain within reach of the Higham St. Andrew police station telephone. I shall probably phone you up in the early evening—and I shall have a lot to tell you."

"All right, Mr. Cromwell—I'll keep handy," agreed the other. "But I'm sure you'll forgive me if I say that I don't know what the devil you're talking about."

They dropped Catchpole in the village, and then took the main London road.

"Step on it, Johnny," advised the chief inspector. "I want to get to headquarters as quickly as possible. This is a brief interlude—what you might call the calm before the storm. An ominous interlude, in fact. Those birds at Higham Top think they're sitting pretty—but, oh boy, they're sitting smack on the summit of a volcano."

"Which, to me," said Johnny Lister, "is as clear as mud. Why the hell must you be so secretive, Old Iron? Surely you can tell *me* what's in that stew pot of a mind of yours?"

"You heard what I said to Catchpole about hunches—and I'm giving you the same answer," retorted Ironsides. "But I'll tell you this much. I believe that this case is going to be something unique. I can hear the dead man laughing at this minute. . . ."

"Hey, whoa! You can hear what?"

"Let it go," said Cromwell gruffly. "Some pretty grim things have been going on in this neck of the woods, Johnny, and I'm going to dig up the truth. Before we can take this case into court we've got to be in a position to produce the evidence—and that's the hardest part of criminal investigation."

"Don't change the subject, dash you," protested the

sergeant, who was looking startled. "You were saying something about the dead man . . ."

"Right this minute," continued Cromwell imperturbably, "murderers are walking about in London and elsewhere, as free as the day—and what's worse, we know they're murderers. But we can't do a thing to arrest them because we're not able to provide a dim-witted jury with that concrete evidence which British justice demands. Nobody in this country can be convicted on suspicion, and every case which relies upon circumstantial evidence is as unsatisfactory as blazes."

"I can name a case of that sort. Hatherton's."

"Right on the dot, Johnny! That boy was convicted on circumstantial evidence. Most of it was circumstantial, anyway. It was only Sir Kenneth Parsloe's statement in the witness-box which turned the scales."

"Which means, I suppose, that you've got your doots about the deceased gent," said Johnny. "Think there's anything in Hatherton's yarn that it was really Sir Kenneth who murdered Millionaire Easton three years ago? It's a bit thick, Old Iron. Saying things like that, I mean, against a man who can't answer for himself. It's easy enough to slander the dead."

Cromwell was silent for some time; and by now the speedy Alvis had reached the main arterial road and was streaking along at over fifty. The surface, here, had been completely cleared of snow by continuous traffic and there was no danger of a skid.

"Supposing, for the sake of argument, that Sir Kenneth Parsloe *did* kill Easton, as Hatherton says, and then shoved the blame on the boy?" said Ironsides abruptly. "That would alter things a bit, eh? We should have a perfect explanation of Hatherton's wild conduct in prison; we should have a perfect explanation of his dogged efforts to escape; and, what's more, a perfect explanation of his determination to take Parsloe by the throat and choke a confession out of him. If we take it for granted that Hatherton was falsely accused, and that the murdered man's partner was the real killer—why, then every one of Hatherton's subsequent actions becomes rational."

"Rational—and peculiarly human," agreed Johnny Lister, nodding. "No man could have a better reason for being an unruly prisoner, and making things hot for the warders. He was driven by some terrific force, in any case, or he would never have escaped as he did. He didn't crumple up until he found that Parsloe was dead. . . . Hell! That must have been

a nasty shock for the poor blighter. The only man in the world who could clear him, dead in a ditch!"

"You saw him this morning, Johnny. What did you think of him?"

"He impressed me as being a decent sort of chap. I haven't had your experience, Old Iron, but I've seen a few killers. And there's something about them... Their eyes—their mouths... It's difficult to describe. But this chap, Hatherton, looks clean and decent."

"That's what I thought," said Cromwell. "At the time of the trial, three years ago, I had an uneasy feeling that old Mrs. Justice was taking a nap. Now that I've seen the boy face to face, and have talked with him, I'm more certain than ever that there's something damnably wrong somewhere."

"But you can't do anything about that old case," protested Johnny. "It was over and done with three years ago. Even if there had been a hope of getting new evidence, Parsloe's death has killed that hope."

"That's what you think, isn't it?" retorted Ironsides enigmatically. "But just wait, Johnny! If that young feller is innocent of that three-year-old crime, I'm going to make it my business to put him back into circulation."

Having said which, the chief inspector gave his celebrated imitation of a clam and remained hunched up in his seat until the car pulled up at Scotland Yard.

Without troubling to write out any report from Johnny's notes, he requested an immediate interview with Colonel Lockhurst, the Assistant Commissioner—and when Ironsides made a request of that sort it was generally granted. He was closeted with his chief for so long that Johnny, who had been left cooling his heels, went out and bought himself a meal. When he returned he found that Ironsides had left the premises—in a hurry.

A full hour passed before he showed up, and Johnny, who knew him so well, easily saw through the mask of gloom which covered his face. When Ironsides looked like that, something hot was boiling up.

"Come off it, Old Iron," said Johnny eagerly. "Where have you been?"

"Chatting with the Home Secretary."

"Well, well! And I've been having a kipper with the Prime Minister," said Johnny tartly.

"Listen, Ornamental!" said Ironsides, with one of his special glares. "I've got something in my pocket—a certain

document, if you must know—which I only got from the blighting Home Secretary by sweat and toil. My God, how I had to toil! The chief was with me, too, mark you, and even his persuasive tongue had to be stretched until it looked like a length of red ribbon. So I'm not in the mood for your funny wisecracks."

"Sorry, old man. I thought you were kidding—honestly." The sergeant looked at Cromwell closely. "Yes, you do look a bit worn. Phew! It had to be something kosher for you to go to the Home Secretary!"

"If you notice a certain hoarseness in my voice, you'll know the reason," continued Ironsides. "I talked and talked, and argued and argued. . . . But I got what I wanted," he added grimly. "And now we can start things moving in earnest. Get through to Catchpole on the phone as quickly as you can."

Johnny had a lot of questions to ask, but he knew the futility of asking them. He was talking to Inspector Catchpole within a few minutes, and he handed the phone to the chief inspector.

"Listen carefully, inspector," said Cromwell. "I've had a talk with the chief, and he's had a talk with your chief constable . . . I'm still on the case. I shall be down in your district to-night. I want you to have six men ready by eleven o'clock. I'll meet you at the police station at Topley Down. . . ."

"You mean Higham St. Andrew, sir?"

"I don't mean Higham St. Andrew. I mean Topley Down. They've got a police station there, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, of course. . . ."

"Then kindly be ready at eleven o'clock and have your men with you," said Bill Cromwell. "I can promise you plenty of entertainment."

He gave a few more instructions which caused the worthy Inspector Catchpole to raise his eyebrows more than a little. However, Cromwell went into no details, and the stout inspector was left guessing.

"Well, that's that," said Cromwell, as he hung up. "Now we'll go and get a bite of something to eat, Johnny, and shoot off into Surrey again."

"I've had something to eat. . . ."

"Better come and have something else—or watch me eating," advised the chief inspector. "It might be a devil of a time before you get another meal."

About forty minutes later, as they were starting off on the drive, Johnny happened to notice that the time was only about eight forty-five.

"Why all the rush, Ironsides?" he asked, for Cromwell had been hurrying him for the last twenty minutes. "We can be there in just over an hour, taking it at a crawl. And your appointment with Catchpole isn't until eleven o'clock."

"My appointment with Catchpole is concerned with official business," replied Ironsides, with a certain grim relish in his voice. "Before that, we're going to do a little unofficial job, Johnny. It'll be irregular, and if the Old Man knew anything about it he'd have the coat off my back in two ticks. But as he doesn't know, what the hell?"

Johnny Lister gave it up. But as they drove down into the country through the crisp frosty air he was aware of a keen tingling along his spine. Going off on an unofficial jaunt with Bill Cromwell held all the promise of something unusual and exciting . . .

CHAPTER NINE

THE DEAD MAN MOVES

DR. BENJAMIN TRUMPER paced up and down in the library at Higham Top. The fine old room was flooded with mellow light, increased by the cheerful blaze from the big fireplace. Sir Philip Parsloe sat in a big chair, watching the doctor's restless perambulations with some curiosity.

"I don't see why you're so nervous, Trumper," he said, at length. "Everything has turned out all right. Cromwell has gone, and it looks as if he isn't coming back. We should have heard something by now if . . ."

"Cromwell—Catchpole—Bristow," said Dr. Trumper, running a hand through his unruly mop of hair. "I had the very devil of a time with the police doctor. I tell you, Parsloe, it's been a damned narrow thing. For two pins, that blasted fool would have recommended a post mortem."

"But he didn't. So why worry?"

"He didn't recommend a post mortem because I talked to him," retorted the doctor. "Up there, standing beside the corpse . . . I argued with him when he seemed inclined to turn awkward. He wasn't entirely satisfied with what he saw. I said, 'what's the good of embarrassing Sir Philip with a lot of unsavoury publicity? Even supposing Hatherton is guilty, is it worth it?'"

"What did Bristow say?"

"He hummed and hawed a bit. I said, 'don't forget Hatherton is a convicted murderer already and he's got to serve a life sentence. After all,' I said, 'no weapon has been found and Cromwell is satisfied that Sir Kenneth died by accident. And he *did* die by accident,' I said. 'I'm perfectly satisfied, and I've been Parsloe's doctor for years.' After a lot of talk he agreed that the skull fracture was consistent with a heavy fall on frozen ground, and he decided to let it go at that."

Sir Philip wondered how much of this was true and how much invention. There had been nothing in Dr. Bristow's manner that morning to suggest that he was not entirely satisfied. . . . And it would naturally be Dr. Trumper's policy to increase his—Philip's—indebtedness as much as possible.

"Cromwell," said Trumper suddenly. "You think he's gone for good, do you? I wish I thought so, Parsloe. You know his reputation . . . As tricky as a cage full of monkeys. . . . He doesn't drop a case so easily."

"But there isn't any case. He said so himself."

"Of all the nights in the year, Hatherton has to come to Higham Top last night," fretted the doctor. "Don't you see how his escape from prison has complicated matters? If he hadn't escaped, Cromwell wouldn't have been down here. Not even the local police would have been active. But that dead body is found, and there's an immediate murder theory expounded."

"You're making a lot of fuss over nothing," said Parsloe impatiently. "You've got the jitters, Trumper. Have a whisky, and sit down. For God's sake, man, sit down. You're making me dizzy, pacing up and down like that. They can't prove anything . . . And let me tell you that your behaviour hasn't done much to improve matters."

"My behaviour?" asked Trumper, nettled.

"You've been too excited. . . ."

"Considering what happened, did you expect me to be calm?" demanded Trumper harshly. "Did you want me to let this damned Scotland Yard man do as he pleased? I had to act like that in order to check him."

"But you didn't check him," snapped the other. "It would have been far better if you had pretended to be indifferent. . . ." He broke off and held up a warning hand as a tap sounded on the door. "Come in," he called; and then he appeared to carry on with a previous remark. "But I thought Mr.

Dinglewell was making all the funeral arrangements? Of course, if you would prefer it . . . What is it, Beale?"

"I was wondering, sir, about the dinner arrangements," said the butler.

"I leave it entirely to you, Beale," said Sir Philip. "I'm still more or less of a stranger in the house, and it'll make things a lot easier for me if you carry on in just the same way as you did for my brother."

"Very good, sir. Will Dr. Trumper be staying to dinner?"

"Of course."

"Mr. Dinglewell, sir? Is he returning . . .?"

"No, Mr. Dinglewell won't be here again until to-morrow. Just the two of us, Beale . . ."

"I'm very much afraid, my dear Parsloe, that I cannot stay," interrupted Dr. Trumper, after a glance at his watch.

"I am late for my surgery already. My practice is not particularly extensive, but the few patients I have expect me to attend to their various ailments. I hope you don't mind?"

"I mind like the devil," replied Sir Philip frankly. "I haven't had dinner by myself for years. I've been accustomed to hotel dining-rooms . . . This great house gets on my nerves. Can't you stay to dinner, really? No? All right, Beale. Just set for one."

"Yes, sir," said the butler.

He went out and closed the door.

"Why the devil can't you stay, Trumper?" asked the new baronet irritably. "Surely you can make an exception for once? Damn your silly patients. . . ."

"I'm not thinking of them," broke in the doctor. "I only said that for the benefit of Beale's ears. I think it's far better that I should go. You seem to forget that we're strangers—we never met until this morning. We shall have to be careful, Parsloe. We mustn't be too friendly on this, the first day of your arrival."

"You are exaggerating the difficulties," protested Parsloe.

"As far as I can see, everything has gone perfectly. And if that interfering fool, Cromwell, starts any funny business I shall know what to do."

"Now you're talking like a lunatic," said the doctor, in alarm. "You can't 'do' anything with a man like Cromwell. If you think you can, you must be insane."

"I know this much—after all our planning and sweating and scheming, I'm not going to be thwarted by an infernal busybody like Cromwell. You'd better go home, Trumper."

Your nerves are shot to pieces. You may be scared of Cromwell, but I'm not. What does it matter if the accident theory is discarded, and Hatherton is charged with murder?"

"It matters this much," replied Trumper sharply. "A case of accidental death, as this is supposed to be, calls for little or no investigation. But if they decide it's murder there'll be a searching inquiry—and once a man like Cromwell starts a rigid investigation there's no telling where he'll stop. They can't touch me. I'm safe. I was with Cromwell at the crucial time. You weren't. . . ."

"Don't make me laugh! Cromwell can prove nothing against me. I've taken too many precautions. . . ."

"You mean, you think you have."

"I know I have! Confound you, Trumper. . . ."

"All right—we won't quarrel," said the doctor hastily. "We're both a bit edgy, I'm afraid. Before I go, though, I'd better take you upstairs. You haven't viewed the body yet, and I think Beale and the staff are a bit scandalised. You can't go there alone, after I've gone."

He rang the bell, and opened the door just as Beale was crossing the hall.

"I shall be off in a few minutes, Beale," said Dr. Trumper. "But before I go I am taking Sir Philip upstairs to see his brother."

"I understand, sir," said the butler gravely.

"You'd better lead the way, doctor," said Parsloe. "I'm still confused in this big house."

They mounted the stairs with becoming gravity, and when they were near the death-room Dr. Trumper took a key out of his pocket.

"I'll hand this over to you now, Sir Philip," he said. "It has not left my possession since your unhappy brother was carried in last night. Mr. Dinglewell has made the funeral arrangements, and the undertaker's men will be here in the morning."

"You'll come in the morning, too, doctor?"

"Yes. As your brother's medical attendant, I shall make a point of being here. . . . If you are at all chary about the matter, Sir Philip, you needn't be present when the body is prepared and placed in the coffin. You can leave everything to me."

"Thanks, doctor," said Parsloe gratefully. "Don't think I'm squeamish, or anything like that, but this business is beginning to get on my nerves. Poor Ken. . . ."

They had unlocked the door of the death-room by this time and they entered. Dr. Trumper softly closed the door and switched on the light.

"What was the idea?" murmured Parsloe. "I took my cue, of course, and gave you the right kind of answers. . . ."

"I believe Beale was within earshot," interrupted the doctor, in a low voice. "We can't be too careful, Parsloe. I wish I could impress that on you. We must watch our tongues constantly. . . ."

"All right—all right," said Parsloe hurriedly.

He was looking across at the fine old bed, on which lay the still, silent figure covered with a white sheet.

"Ugh! This room gives me the creeps, Trumper. Must we stay long? A couple of minutes ought to do. . . ."

"You're going to look at the body, aren't you?"

"Look at it! What the hell for? Do you think I like looking at dead bodies? Damn you, Trumper, it's not necessary to keep up this farce while you and I are alone. Let's get out of here."

"We must remain for a decent time," said the doctor coldly.

"If you think I am feeling comfortable, Parsloe, you are entirely wrong. I don't like being in here any more than you. But there can be no drawing back now."

While speaking he had moved softly forward towards the bed. Parsloe remained near the door. The atmosphere of this chamber of death was gripping him like something cold and clammy.

Dr. Trumper was about to remove the sheet from the face when he suddenly checked, and a puzzled look came over his face. The next moment the puzzled look turned into one of absolute panic. Parsloe saw the veins on the doctor's temples swelling and beating.

"Good God!"

"What's the matter with you, man?" asked Parsloe, sweating. "Don't look like that. . . ."

"I remember now," whispered Trumper, the colour draining from his face. "Yes, I remember. . . ."

"What are you talking about? Are you crazy?"

"Crazy?" repeated the doctor, like one in a dream. "Yes, Parsloe, I think I must be."

"In God's name, tell me. . . ."

"This sheet has been moved," whispered Dr. Trumper.

"You fool, of course it's been moved," snapped the other. "Weren't you in here this morning with Bristow?"

"Yes, I was in here this morning with Bristow," replied the doctor, in a strained voice. "I seemed to have some vague feeling that something was wrong—but Bristow was talking all the time, and I was unable to concentrate. But look here, Parsloe." He pointed. "Come closer. You see that tiny hole in the sheet?"

"Which hole?"

"There—at the top of the head. If you look closely, you can see the dark hair."

"Yes, I can see it. What about it?"

"Last night, when I covered the body with this sheet, I subconsciously noticed the same thing. The sheet covered the face in exactly the same way—so that the hair was visible through the tiny hole."

"Go on!" said Parsloe, running a finger round his clammy collar. "Damn you, Trumper, you're giving me the jitters. What are you trying to say?"

"This morning, when I removed the sheet for Bristow, that little hole in the sheet was lower down—just about the position of the nose," replied the doctor huskily. "It didn't strike me at the time, although I was aware that *something* was not exactly as it should be. Only now, when I see the sheet as I originally placed it last night—and as I automatically replaced it this morning—do I fully understand."

"Well, it's more than I can understand," snapped the other irritably. "I don't see what you're getting at. . . ."

"Listen, Parsloe," said Trumper tensely. "Last night I covered the body with the sheet in a certain way. I came out of this room and locked the door. The key never left my possession. Yet when I came in here with Bristow this morning *the sheet had been moved.*"

"That's idiotic. Nobody could have moved it. . . ."

"Idiotic or not, I tell you this sheet was moved during the night," said the doctor, in acute alarm. "And that can mean only one thing. Somebody came in here during the night."

Some of Trumper's panic transferred itself to Sir Philip. The doctor's manner, plus the eerie atmosphere of the room, was getting him well and truly down. He had hated the room from the first, but now he wanted to run out of it as fast as his legs could carry him. But he forced himself to be calm by a great effort of will.

"Your nerves are certainly in a rotten state, Trumper," he said deliberately. "You know what you're saying, I suppose? If the room was locked, and the key was in your

pocket, nobody could have been in. Don't be such a damned fool. Or are you suggesting that the body moved of its own accord?"

"My God, that's another thing," whispered Dr. Trumper. "I seemed to get the impression, when Bristow was in here, that the body *had* been moved . . . Don't look at me like that, Parsloe. I'm not mad. I'm not suggesting anything supernatural. But I *am* suggesting that Cromwell has been in this room."

There was a taut silence.

"Cromwell?" muttered Parsloe, at length.

"Cromwell," said the doctor, clenching his hands until the knuckles showed white. "Who else but Cromwell? I told you, from the first, that he was dangerous. . . ."

"I don't believe it."

"You'd better believe it," snapped Trumper. "Cromwell may look very ordinary, but he's got a tremendous reputation. . . . Men don't get reputations like that unless they've done something to deserve it. He's clever—he's tricky—he's deep. I hope to God he is not *too* clever for us."

"I tell you," said Parsloe fiercely, "that you're mistaken. Just because you fancy the sheet is in a different position you jump to these fantastic conclusions. The only way Cromwell could have got into this room would have been by breaking in, or picking the lock. No police officer—let alone a highly placed Scotland Yard man—would flout regulations like that. It would be more than his job was worth."

Trumper stood quite still, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"As regards the average police officer, I agree with you," he said. "But Cromwell. . . . He's different. I've read things about him. . . . He's one of the few men at the Yard who refuse to be bound by red tape. He has done things which would have resulted in any other man getting dismissed from the Force. And I'm telling you, Parsloe, that if he took a fancy to pick the lock of this door during the night, he'd do it. It's characteristic of him."

"Yes, but . . ."

"He slept here last night. Like an imbecile, you invited him to sleep here . . . I told you how he tried to give the body a close examination, didn't I? It took me all my time to keep him off. I was at my wits' end. He may have thought that my attitude was only caused by professional etiquette . . . Whatever the cause, he was curious—so curious that he came

into this room secretly and gave the body a complete examination."

There was another grim silence.

"In the night, eh?" said Sir Philip, his eyes hard and cold. "It wouldn't have been any hurried examination, Trumper. He was probably here for hours. . . . But wait a minute. Cromwell's no doctor. How would he know . . . ?"

"He's no doctor, but he's seen more dead bodies than an undertaker," interrupted Trumper fretfully. "Not ordinary dead bodies. . . . Murdered men and women—suicides—accident cases. He's seen men dead from poisoning—every kind of poisoning—and he knows what to look for. . . ."

"This is a mess," muttered Parsloe.

"Above all else, we wanted to avoid the body being examined by anybody with a suspicious mind," continued the doctor. "If everything had gone smoothly, as we planned, it would have been my duty, as family doctor, to make my examination and give the cause of death. It would have been so simple . . . But how do we stand now? Above all, how much does Cromwell suspect?"

"Never mind how much he suspects. How much does he *know*? It's beginning to look very ugly, Trumper. We shall have to do something about it."

"Do something," said Trumper shrilly. "There's nothing we can do. We're committed now. . . ."

"We might be able to do something," interrupted the other, his usually genial voice as brittle as ice. "But we can't talk about it here. We've been in this room too long already. The servants will be wondering."

"Yes, yes, you are right."

They went out, and Parsloe pocketed the key. Downstairs, in the hall, Parsloe looked about him as though searching for something.

"Where can I find a bell?"

"If you want Beale, he's just coming."

The butler was emerging from a heavy baize door which shut off the domestic quarters.

"I'm going out, Beale," said Parsloe shortly.

"But dinner, sir . . . ?"

"I don't feel like dinner. After seeing my poor brother . . . I'm going to drive Dr. Trumper home to Lower Martin. I don't know when I shall be back—but don't bother about dinner."

"Very good, sir," said the butler, with a look of sympathy.

"I quite understand, sir. I'll tell Edwards to have the car round at the front door as quickly as possible."

"His name is Edwards, is it?" said Sir Philip. "You can tell him that I shan't be needing him. I will drive myself."

The car was ready within a few minutes, and it was soon purring down the drive through the crisp wintry air.

"Why didn't you let Edwards drive?" asked the doctor.

"It would have looked much better."

"I want to talk—that's why. How could I talk with a chauffeur in the car? No fear of being overheard in a travelling car, Trumper. In the house, I felt that ears were everywhere—and it won't be much better at your place."

"That's nonsense. We should have been safe enough in the library. The servants, at least, are in no way suspicious. You've got to avoid giving the impression, Parsloe, that we are in any way nervous. . . ."

"My cancellation of dinner and my driving home with you was perfectly natural in the circumstances," said Parsloe shortly. "Don't let's waste time in talking about things that don't matter. We've got to do something about Cromwell. Has he really dropped out of the case, or is he up to some of his monkey tricks? We must know, Trumper."

"How can we know? We don't even know where he is. Parsloe, you mustn't do anything drastic. Things are bad enough already, without making them worse."

The doctor was feeling frightened. Something about the profile of the man at the wheel, his face revealed in the light from the instrument board, turned his blood cold. Here was a very different Parsloe. . . .

"Don't worry yourself, my friend," said the new baronet cynically. "I shall not ask you to do anything that could possibly injure your reputation. . . ."

"We are in this thing together, Parsloe," interrupted the other excitedly. "If you go and do some damn-fool thing I shall be implicated. I demand to know what you have in your mind? If you are contemplating any act of violence against this man Cromwell. . . ."

"Now, of course, you are merely becoming melodramatic," snapped Parsloe. "An awkward situation has arisen, and we must deal with it. It may require a little thought."

Nothing more was said until they reached Bridge House.

"Yes, I think I'll come in," said Parsloe. "While you are attending to your patients in the surgery, I'll enjoy a whisky

and soda in your den. I shall welcome an hour's solitude, doctor. I want to think."

Dr. Benjamin Trumper shivered.

CHAPTER TEN

SLIGHTLY IRREGULAR

"GO EASY here, Johnny," said Bill Cromwell, as he sat forward in the Alvis, peering through the windscreen. "What does it say on that signpost? Curse it, must you go so fast?" He twisted his head round, trying to read the signpost as they went past. "All right—bear left."

"You mean right, don't you?"

"I mean left."

"It distinctly says 'Topley Down' on the right finger," objected Johnny Lister. "I couldn't make out what it said on the other...."

"It said 'Little Didswater,' and it's the road I want. We're not going to Topley Down just yet. Plenty of time. We're not due to join up with Catchpole until eleven."

"I get it," said the immaculate sergeant. "That irregular bit of business you were talking about, eh? But where does Little Didswater come in?"

"As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't come in at all," replied Ironsides. "Just keep going along this road until I tell you to stop. You'll come to another fork after about two miles. Bear left when we get to it."

Johnny was thoughtful for some moments.

"If it comes to that, why Topley Down?" he asked. "What's the idea of going to these tinpot little places in wildest Surrey? Not that you'll tell me."

"Put it down to my incurable curiosity," said Cromwell, as he sat back in his seat. "At odd times, Johnny, I can be very nosy. I'm going to be nosy this evening—and for the time being I'm going to forget that I'm a cop."

Johnny was left wondering. They had passed through Higham St. Andrew ten minutes ago, and had not even taken the road to Lower Martin. Now, for some reason known only to Ironsides, they were on their way to Little Didswater. Yet Ironsides was not interested in Little Didswater....

Johnny was aware of a thrill. When Bill Cromwell acted like

this, it meant that he was on a hot trail; he had spotted something which Johnny himself had completely overlooked. Ironsides was never inquisitive unless he had a cast-iron reason. His actions at the moment were mysterious, and Johnny was to find out that they would become more mysterious still later on.

"Here's the fork," said Johnny. "Left, you said, didn't you? Here, dash it, you must be wrong, Old Iron! This left fork isn't the road at all. It's only a narrow farm track."

"It'll take the car, won't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so. . . ."

"Then don't argue. Carry on."

It was, indeed, a narrow, rutty lane, with grass growing along the central ridge. There were two tracks which had been made by farm carts and tractors, and they were full of potholes. The car rocked and bumped as it went along this uncomfortable trail. In places the pot holes were filled with rainwater, and the rainwater had become covered with ice, and the ice cracked and broke as the car went over them. It was still freezing this evening, although the sky was now overcast, giving promise of an early change in the weather.

"This'll do," said Ironsides suddenly, as he caught sight of a queer looking conical-towered building by the side of the lane. "Stop right here, Johnny. Better still, shove the car into that gateway just ahead."

A ramshackle gate was standing conveniently open, and Johnny edged the car through the narrow space and switched off. He removed the key and extinguished the lights.

"Now what?"

"Let me see . . . Over this way, I think . . . Yes, there's a stile here, and a footpath," said Ironsides, as he crossed the rutty track and laboriously climbed the rustic stile. "There are one or two buildings in this neighbourhood that I want to have a look at."

"A fine time to come and look at buildings," said the sergeant, as he followed over the stile. "You've been here before, haven't you?"

"Never."

"Then how did you know where to stop? How did you know about this stile?"

"You ask too many questions," growled Ironsides.

He was walking at a brisk pace along the footpath. Now and again he paused to peer over fence tops, or gaps in the hedge, to take his bearings.

"I get it," said Johnny, as a solution came to him. "Before you started out from the Yard you had a jolly good squint at a large-scale ordnance map, eh? And you're looking for something quite definite. Okay—carry on. I'm lost. Tagging along with you, Old Iron, is just one long headache. It wouldn't be so bad if you'd let a chap into your secrets. But you're such a confounded oyster. . . . Over here, eh? Well, I hope you know where you're going. I may be wrong, but it seems to me we're going to walk slapbang into a river."

"There ought to be a little bridge just down here," jerked Ironsides. "Yes. There it is."

They followed the river bank for about a hundred yards and then crossed over an ancient arched brick bridge. There was no actual road, but only a weed-grown footpath. There was a hedge on one side, and a ploughed field on the other. The dim light from a lonely cottage could be seen about half a mile away on the right; otherwise there was no sign of human habitation. The spot was very remote. On the cold night air a shrill whistle sounded from about a mile away, and Johnny heard the distant rumbling of a train.

Having reached the end of the ploughed field, they crossed another stile, and plunged into a dark and sinister looking spinney. Once out of this belt of woodland, they moved across a small meadow and then climbed a medium-sized brick wall. Cromwell was now talking in whispers—when he talked at all.

"More trees," murmured Johnny, as he looked up at the barren branches outlined against the sky. "Fruit trees, too. This one's an apple . . . plum . . . pear . . . We're in an orchard. I'm sorry to say it, Old Iron, but I believe we're trespassing."

"Gab—gab—gab! That's all you can do!" whispered Cromwell testily. "For the love of Mike, Johnny, dry up. We're getting pretty near now."

There was a thick hedge on the other side of the orchard, and Ironsides moved cautiously along it until he came to a small gate. He opened this gate and passed through into a wide, secluded courtyard—apparently the rear premises of some big country house. Thick trees grew all around, however, and it was difficult to see anything except one or two squat buildings in the immediate foreground. But they were not like ordinary outbuildings. They bore no resemblance to barns or stables or garages. They were in total darkness, and it seemed to Johnny, somehow, that they were ugly and sinister.

"Amazing, how you found your way here without once going wrong, Ironsides," breathed the sergeant. "I suppose

this is the right place? I don't like the look of these flat-topped buildings."

"Stay right here, Johnny," interrupted Cromwell:

He had paused for a moment on a paved path which led from a heavy gate set in a dense evergreen hedge to the nearest of the peculiar buildings. There was no snow on this path, and it had apparently been swept during the morning.

The chief inspector satisfied himself that the gate was not locked. Peering through the bars he caught a vague glimpse of a shadowy house across an expanse of flower garden. Turning away, he walked along the path to the building. There was one door, and it was locked.

"What's that hum?" whispered Johnny.

"Inside here—power house," replied Ironsides. "I thought so. One of those automatic installations, I imagine. Well, I've seen all I want to see here."

"Then you're easily satisfied," grunted Johnny. "What the devil was there to see, anyway?"

Irritated, he followed Cromwell along another paved path to a somewhat larger building—a low, flat-roofed, oblong building made of concrete. The power house had one or two high windows; but this building presented nothing but barren walls. Not even a grating. Just one solid looking door set into the thick wall at the end.

"Not much fear of our being disturbed at this hour of the evening," murmured Ironsides. "Grab hold of this torch, Johnny, and mind you don't flash the light about. Keep the beam concentrated on the keyhole. It may take me some little time to pick the lock."

"I said it once before, Old Iron, and I say it again—I hope you know what you're doing!" whispered the sergeant uneasily. "It's one thing being nosy, but this is barefaced housebreaking."

"I don't care what it is—I'm going to have a look inside this building," snapped the chief inspector, as he crouched down near the keyhole and produced his bunch of skeleton keys. "If you're squeamish, give me the torch and clear off. I'm an old man, anyhow—and it doesn't matter much if my career is ruined. No need for both of us to get kicked out of the Force."

Johnny Lister refused to make any reply to this crack, and he watched Ironsides interestedly as the latter manipulated the various keys with the sensitive skill of a professional cracksman. His touch was so light, his experience so profound,

that the smallest jarring was instantly transferred to his fingers.

"Nothing in it, Johnny," he murmured complacently. "It's only an ordinary lock, after all. A good strong one, admittedly, but not half as formidable as it looks . . . Now, steady. . . . Yes, I think we're getting it . . . Good!"

There was a faint click, and as Cromwell softly turned the heavy metal knob of the door he withdrew the key.

"Nice work, Old Iron," approved Johnny, as he moved the torchlight. "What did they call you before you joined the Force—Porch Climbing Willie?"

"Keep that light down, you human gramophone, and don't try to be funny," snapped Ironsides. "Better give the torch to me."

He passed cautiously into the building, and Johnny followed on tiptoe, wondering what he was going to see. Ironsides closed the door, but did not secure it. Johnny was frankly disappointed, for all he saw was a small entrance lobby with bare walls and a wooden bench along one side. Immediately facing the outer door was another door. And this one was of steel, solid looking and massive.

"Uh-huh!" grunted Cromwell. "For a moment I thought we were up against a nasty snag. There's a lock on this inner door, Johnny—but it's just an ordinary patent lock with a knob on the outside."

"What is it—a strong room?" asked Johnny wonderingly.

"You'll soon find out. Got your gloves on? Better put 'em on. And wrap that woollen muffler round your throat."

Cromwell turned the knob and pulled the heavy door open. He paused for a moment to have a look at the lock before entering the inner chamber. It seemed to the sergeant that an eerie chill had come into the atmosphere—until he realised that the lowering of the temperature was caused by the opening of the door. When he actually entered the chamber, in Ironsides' wake, the icy coldness gripped him like something tangible.

"Here, what on earth . . ."

The "v" fell back in his throat. Cromwell's torchlight, sweeping across the darkness, revealed something which stood only a short distance away—an enormous Alsatian dog, crouching menacingly, its eyes glittering with danger.

"H—v look out!" gurgled Johnny.

"What's the matter—nervy?" sniffed Cromwell. "This thing won't hurt you. He's dead as mutton."

"Well I'm damned!"

Ironsides advanced quickly, and the dog remained motionless.

"Yes, just as I thought." The chief inspector's voice had a note of gloating grimness as he went back to the doorway and pressed an electric light switch. Two powerful lights sprang into life in the ceiling, which, like the walls of this strange chamber, was of metal. "Pretty cold, eh, Johnny? How would you like to spend the night in here with only a candle?"

Johnny Lister's lower jaw was sagging. He forgot the bitter cold which was beginning to numb his limbs. He was staring slowly round the oblong apartment. He noted, in a subconscious way, the steel walls, the steel ceiling, and the concrete floor. There was no outlet—not even a tiny ventilator. But down one side of the chamber ran a long bench of pure white marble. And on this bench were—things. Animals . . . A cat . . . a fox . . . rats and mice . . . a beaver . . . And all of them were standing about in lifelike attitudes, their eyes glinting in the electric light.

"Some people have queer hobbies, haven't they?" commented Ironsides, as he moved forward. "They're all dead, Johnny—and all made of flesh and blood."

"Stuffed, you mean?"

"Stuffed nothing. They're frozen."

"Here, I say . . ."

"They died just as you see them—except that they were put into these realistic attitudes just before they stiffened. It's this refrigerating chamber that has preserved them. I daresay some of them died months ago."

"Refrigerating chamber . . . ! But I've never seen . . ."

"Neither have I. There's no trace of frost on the walls or on the subjects. It's a new kind of plant, Johnny, but the main principle is the same. To all intents and purposes, this is an ordinary cold storage chamber."

Johnny was staring wonderingly.

"You knew!" he said bluntly.

"I knew what?"

"You knew what this place was. You told me to tighten my muffler before we came in."

"I didn't know—but I had a pretty good hunch that we'd find something like this," said Cromwell complacently. "I don't mind telling you, Johnny, that I'm relieved. Everything I have seen here is perfectly innocent and harmless. I'm not so sure, now, that it is a hobby. I'm beginning to think that

Dr. Trumper has a sound and solid reason for this pastime."

"Kick me, Old Iron," begged the sergeant. "Dr. Trumper—of course! I might have known. This place belongs to him, then?"

"I imagine so—it's at the bottom of his garden."

"Then we're actually in Lower Martin?"

"Yes. Didn't you recognise the river, when we crossed over that little arched bridge? Just because we approached the place from a new angle you got confused. You thought we were miles away in some other district."

"You needn't be so cocky about it," grumbled Johnny. "I'm not only a stranger in these parts, but I didn't have the advantage of looking at an ordnance map before I started out. Well, what does it mean?" He waved a comprehensive hand. "All this funny business?"

"I'm remembering something Dr. Trumper said when he was told that he had come in for a legacy of twenty-five thousand pounds," replied Ironsides thoughtfully. "He said, 'now I shall be able to give up my practice and devote my time to the work I love.' This, Johnny, is apparently the work he loves."

"He's welcome to it," said Johnny, buttoning his coat more closely. "What is it, anyway?"

Cromwell was examining the frozen dog.

"Not a mark of any wound," he said. "Either the thing was suffocated or quietly put to sleep in the way that animals *are* put to sleep. It seems to me that Dr. Trumper is an anatomist, or something of that kind, with big ideas on a new angle. He hasn't preserved these creatures just for the fun of the thing. A plant of this kind isn't run on tuppence a week."

"That blighting doctor must be an absolute sadist," said the sergeant, with a shiver. "He ought to be suppressed. . . ."

"Hold your horses, young feller," interrupted Cromwell. "Dr. Trumper's activities are perfectly legitimate and reasonable, as far as I can see. He's not merely a country doctor—he's a scientist, an experimenter. It's men of that type who advance the world's knowledge—and who generally get kicked around and ridiculed while they are conducting their preliminary experiments. No, I see nothing wrong in this place. I wanted to satisfy my curiosity, and I've satisfied it. We can leave as soon as you like. This cold storage plant is no more sinister than our big laboratory at the Yard."

"I take it, then, that you only came here to . . ." Johnny

Lister broke off abruptly, his gaze, very startled, directed over Ironsides' shoulder. "Hey! Look at that door. . . ."

"Door? What about it?"

Clang!

Cromwell swung round just as the heavy steel door slammed and the patent lock clicked. A very startled light sprang into the chief inspector's eyes. He ran to the door and heaved his shoulder against it.

"Hell!" he said briefly.

They stood tense, Ironsides in a listening attitude. But no sound came from the other side of the door. Within that chamber the silence was like something solid.

"Johnny," said Ironsides softly, "we're in a mess."

"We're shut in, if that's what you mean. A sudden draught must have caught the door. . . ."

"A blinking gale couldn't have shifted that heavy door," interrupted Cromwell curtly. "I've been in a few ugly corners in my time, but this has all the earmarks of being the ugliest."

"But there's no danger. . . ."

"Oh, no? How does the idea of being frozen to death strike you? What do you suppose we can do?" Ironsides waved a hand at the steel walls. "No chance of breaking out of here, my lad. Only one door—and look at it. No keyhole on this side. Nothing but blank steel. If we had a few pounds of dynamite we might stand a chance—or a big morse drill would come in handy. But as we haven't got any dynamite, or any drills, it's a waste of time to talk about 'em. Better take it on the chin, Johnny—we're prisoners."

"You don't mean. . . !"

"Yes, I do. Some kindly gentleman closed that door deliberately, knowing full well that we were in here. Didn't you see me slip the safety catch back before we came in? Even if, by some miracle, the wind had moved the door, it couldn't possibly have fastened itself. Oh no. It was done deliberately."

"Somebody," said Johnny, "has got nasty ideas."

"And the point is—how nasty?" said Ironsides. "It may be just a trick to scare us, the idea being to shut us in here for an hour or two until we've cooled off. But don't count on it. More likely, we're in a death trap."

"Cheerful bird, aren't you?"

"Johnny, I'm scared—and that's the truth," said Bill Cromwell earnestly. "Somebody crept into that outer lobby, released the safety catch, and closed the door on us."

"Trumper, eh?"

"Well, it's Trumper's property, and you'd imagine so."

"But how did he know we were in here?"

"He may not have known—until he got to the outer door and found it ajar," said Ironsides, releasing a few curses. "I was a damned fool not to leave you on guard out there. No good talking now. . . . But I don't get it. I didn't think Trumper was that kind of man."

"What do you mean—you didn't think he was that kind of man? He was in the plot to murder Sir Kenneth Parsloe. . . ."

"Was he?"

"And if he can murder Parsloe, he can murder us. . . ." Johnny checked. "What do you mean—was he? You know dashed well he's mixed up in this dirty business."

"Oh, he's mixed up in it all right. I'm not denying that."

"Then everything fits."

"It fits too well—and it fits in the wrong way," retorted Ironsides enigmatically. "Unless my conclusions are wrong to blazes, the doctor isn't the kind of man to murder us in cold blood. . . . and I mean cold blood. Not," he added, "that it makes much difference who slammed the door. We shall be dead by morning."

The sergeant looked about him understandingly.

"I see what you mean about cold blood," he said, trying to equal Cromwell's nonchalance. "You always were a pessimist, weren't you? I don't see why we should freeze to death, Old Iron. If we keep moving about. . . ."

"We shall delay the end for a bit, yes," interrupted Ironsides, with devastating directness. "But that's all, Johnny. The coldness in this chamber is already getting into our bones. It's an airtight chamber, too. Remember that."

"Golly!" muttered Johnny.

"Look at the door—hermetically sealed. No ventilation of any kind. The air in here will last us for some hours, but it won't be long before our lungs start going back on us. Then we shan't be able to walk about any more. The cold will get right hold of us. . . ."

"That's right—pile it on!" growled Johnny. "You old ghoul, there's no need to make it worse."

"Just preparing you, that's all."

"Thanks all the same, but I don't need any preparing. I'd much rather think of ways and means of escaping. Isn't there anything we can do?"

"Name just one."

"We might try shouting."

"In a sealed, soundproof chamber? That would do a lot of good—especially to our lungs, when we need 'em to keep us alive a bit longer."

"Oh, hell!" said Johnny, as he paced up and down, his eyes shifting restlessly to every corner of the walls and ceiling.

"This is sticky, and no mistake."

"My fault entirely," grunted the chief inspector, with bitter self-reproach. "I deserve to be frozen stiff for my blasted carelessness—but there was no need to drag you into it, too. I ought to have left you outside . . ." He broke off, frowning malevolently. "Johnny, I can't understand it. I'd have been willing to bet my next summer's holiday that Trumper wouldn't do a thing like this. Dammit, it's against all my reasoning—against all my judgment of the man's character. He's mixed up in a queer conspiracy, but deliberate murder is a crime which stands by itself. It's all wrong, Johnny. It's wrong to blazes."

He stamped up and down, scowling. Johnny stamped up and down, too, for his limbs were beginning to get numb. Quite suddenly he came to a halt and stood so still that he closely resembled one of the frozen animals on the benches. He was staring fixedly, fascinatedly, at a corner of the ceiling farthest from the door.

"What are you looking at?" asked Ironsides irritably.

"Hold everything," whispered Johnny tensely. "I'm thinking . . . Yes, I believe . . . Hey, wait a minute!" He turned and looked at the chief inspector with mingled consternation and anxiety. "Ironsides, for God's sake don't tell me that you haven't got a gun on you?"

"A gun? Yes . . ."

"You've got a gun?"

"It's against regulations, but I slipped one into my pocket before we started out," said Cromwell, gazing at his assistant in surprise. "But what do you think you're going to do with a gun? You'll never shoot that door lock to pieces. . . ."

"I'm not thinking about the lock," interrupted Johnny. "You've got a gun, eh? Gimme! You're doubtful about Trumper, aren't you? Well, we can put him to the test—and if he's not the man who shut us up in here we might see the morning yet."

"If you'll stop gibbering, and talk sense, I'd like it a lot better," said Cromwell tartly. "How the devil can you put Trumper to such a test? With a gun?"

"I'll show you," said Johnny, his eyes shining. "Look over there—in that corner. What do you see?"

"You mean that metal tube running across a corner of the ceiling? What about it?"

"It's not an ordinary metal tube—it's the iron casing of a power cable. You've seen plenty of them, hundreds of times. Now watch."

Johnny Lister took deliberate aim with the automatic pistol and there were two deafening explosions as he sent a couple of bullets hurtling into the metal tubing. Instantly, a blinding blue flash followed and the cold storage chamber was plunged into darkness. The air was full of cordite fumes, and Ironsides, who had caught the full blast, choked and coughed.

"Nice work!" he grated, when he could recover his speech. "Congratulations—you big dummy! What the hell do you think you've done? We're in the dark now. . . ."

"Of course we're in the dark," came Johnny's voice. "Don't you know what happened? The power cable was broken, and it caused a short circuit. All the main fuses in the power house were blown out."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DR. TRUMPER LOOKS IN

BILL CROMWELL, pulling the electric torch out of his pocket, played the light upon Johnny Lister's face, as though searching for signs of incipient insanity. Apparently he was satisfied with his scrutiny.

"Spill it, Johnny," he said briefly. "What's the lowdown?"

"I'm tempted to leave you guessing," retorted Johnny. "You've had me guessing for the last twenty-four hours, and it's about time you had some of your own medicine. But my heart isn't a chunk of stone, like yours, so I'll enlighten your lamentable ignorance. Honestly, Old Iron, the things you don't know about electricity are appalling. . . ."

"Get on with it, you blighting young idiot, and tell me why you fused that power cable."

"Well, we can't release ourselves, can we? So we'll wait until somebody comes along to release us. Incidentally, the shutting off of the power—caused by the blowing of the fuses—has put a stop to the freezing process in here."

"That's something . . ."

"But not much," warned Johnny. "The temperature in a plant like this isn't likely to rise more than a degree or two for hours. It won't make any difference to our dying or living. But something else will."

"Get on with it, curse you."

"If Dr. Trumper deliberately shut us in this place it stands to reason he's at home, and he won't take any notice of the power failure."

"How do you know he won't? And how do you know that he's aware of the power failure?"

"Because, you old chump, the blowing of the main fuses put out all the lights in the house," explained Johnny tensely. "Any short circuit of the main cables has that effect."

"Well?"

"Well, reason it out for yourself. If Trumper shut us up in here, he'll guess in a minute that it was us who caused the short circuit and he won't take any notice. Anyhow, you can bet your boots he won't come here to investigate. He'll just make some excuse to his servants and leave it at that."

"And if Trumper didn't lock us in?"

"Then he'll wonder what the dickens has happened, and he'll make a bee line for the power house to find out. He'll find the main fuses blown, he'll switch off, and he'll put new fuses in. When he switches on again, the new fuses will blow . . ."

"Why?"

"Because this cable is still broken. He'll probably search about the house, looking for a short circuit and he won't find one. He'll think something must have gone wrong in this place—and he'll come along to have a look. So, if that door opens and Trumper appears, we shall be saved, and it'll prove that he didn't try to kill us. Simple."

Ironsides made a few congratulatory grunts.

"You've saved my life more than once, Johnny, and if you save it again to-night—by simply sending a couple of bullets into a power cable—I shall begin to think you're pretty useful, after all," he said grudgingly. "Yes, I get the idea. It's smart. Infernally smart. As you say, it'll definitely prove the thing, one way or the other. All we've got to do now, I suppose, is to wait."

"That's all. Let's walk up and down."

It was highly necessary for them to walk up and down, for the coldness had penetrated their flesh and bones until they

felt stiff. It was no ordinary coldness, but a deadly paralysing chill which seemed to numb their very brains.

Ironsides put out the torchlight, for there was no sense in wasting the battery, and they continued their pacing arm in arm. A grim and unique situation. Two Scotland Yard officers, with possible death lurking over them, walking up and down in total darkness and talking about all manner of things which did not concern the immediate peril. They talked of politics, of their last year's holidays, of sport . . . and all the time Johnny Lister, at least, was aware of those frozen creatures standing on the long bench so near at hand. His imagination began to play tricks; he thought he heard tiny sounds from the darkness, as though the dead things were coming to life. . . . It was an ordeal which would live in his memory for many a day.

"Getting colder, Ironsides," he muttered, referring to their predicament for the first time. "Any idea what the time is?"

Cromwell consulted his luminous wrist-watch.

"Nearly half-past ten. H'm! We shall be late for our appointment with Catchpole, by the look of it. . . ."

"How long since the lights went out? An hour?"

"Sixteen minutes." Ironsides was positive. "I looked at my watch just after you'd fired the gun. It was just twelve minutes past ten."

"Sure your watch is going? It seems a lot longer. . . ."

Zzzzzzzh!

"What the hell's that?" yelled Ironsides, jumping.

A dazzling blue flash, long and blinding, accompanied by a crackling noise, had come from a corner of the ceiling. Then the darkness shut down again.

"A good sign, Old Iron," said Johnny Lister. "It's a hint that we're going to be let out of this ice-box."

"I see. Somebody shoved in some new main fuses in the power house and switched on?"

"You're improving," said Johnny indulgently. "Naturally, the fuses blew again."

"Which means that somebody ought to be here before long. I expect the house points have been examined already, and found to be in good condition. There's only this cold storage plant left. Like to make a bet on how long it'll take for somebody to . . ."

"I'm not making any bets," interrupted Johnny, his voice thin with excitement. "Didn't you hear something just then?"

Listen ! That's the sound of a key. . . . It worked, Old Iron—it worked ! Somebody's opening the door."

Cromwell was never one to express much emotion, and he said nothing now ; all he did was to grip Johnny's arm as hard as his numbed fingers would permit, and it was a vice-like grip, at that. They owed their lives to Johnny's ingenuity. If Trumper had shut them in, meaning to kill them, he would not have come near the place until he was sure they were dead ; if he had not shut them in, then it was obvious he knew nothing of their predicament, and would not have come to the plant until the next day, when it would have been too late. Whichever way Ironsides looked at it, he knew that he owed his life to Johnny.

The door swung slowly open, and the beam of an electric torch slashed into the darkness. Behind the beam, shadowy and vague, was the figure of Dr. Benjamin Trumper. It looked peculiarly sinister as he half crouched, a glow of reflected light showing up one side of his face.

"Many thanks, Dr. Trumper," said Cromwell abruptly.

"Almighty God !" gasped the doctor, starting so violently that he nearly dropped the torch. "Who . . . who is it ? Cromwell ! You here . . . in this place . . ."

He broke off as though the words were choking in his throat. His face, what could be seen of it, was expressive of unutterable consternation and shocked amazement. For some moments, indeed, he stood swaying, like one dazed—as though he had just received a stunning physical blow.

"I'm glad it's you who came, doctor," went on Ironsides, as he took quick paces to the door and stood with his back against it. "I'm afraid, if you hadn't come, you would have had two more frozen specimens here by the morning."

Dr. Trumper had apparently heard nothing. When he recovered his voice he spoke in a strangled whisper, expressing the one thought that was in his mind.

"What—are—you—doing—here ?" he asked with an appreciable pause between each word.

"That's rather difficult to answer," said Ironsides frankly.

"I suppose I owe you an apology, doctor. Yes. No supposing about it. I do owe you an apology. I was sure you wouldn't show me this place, even if I asked nicely ; so I took the liberty of examining it without your permission."

While he had been speaking Dr. Trumper had partially recovered from the first shock, and the look of fear in his eyes was superseded by a blind and burning rage.

"What are you doing on my property?" he shouted, his voice rising to an angry bellow. "My lights suddenly go out, I go to the power house to discover the cause, and I find the main fuses blown. I come here and find you locked in my experimental cold storage plant. . . ."

"Didn't you know we were here?"

"How could I know?" roared Dr. Trumper. "I left the door locked . . . I never come here after dark. I am not only amazed, but furious. Mr. Cromwell, this is an absolute outrage. I demand an instant explanation. How dare you break into my private property in this criminal fashion?"

"I'm sorry, doctor. . . ."

"Sorry! That's no explanation. What did you expect to find here? How dare you come prowling about in the night, breaking into people's houses, prying and spying. . . ."

"It's not so bad as that, sir," broke in Cromwell gently. "I was curious, I'll admit, but I only wanted to satisfy myself on a certain point."

"Eh? What's that? Satisfy yourself on what point?" demanded the doctor sharply. "And didn't you tell me you were dropping out of the case? Is that one of your Scotland Yard tricks? I am very angry, Mr. Cromwell—very angry, indeed. I am going to make a complaint to your superior officers, and see that you are dismissed from the Force for this outrage."

"And what's more, sir, you could do it," admitted Ironsides, with a shrug.

He was watching Trumper closely, and he could see that the man was far more frightened than angry, and he was using this show of anger to mask his fear.

"Wouldn't it be better, sir, if we went up to the house?" continued Cromwell. "Much more comfortable. You say you want an explanation, but this place isn't a very suitable one for holding a discussion. You can't do much with the lights, I'm afraid, until the power cable is repaired." He jerked a pointing finger towards the shattered casing. "My assistant, here, put a bullet through the wires. It was the only way we could attract your attention."

"Very well. We will go to the house."

He stood aside stiffly, allowing the two Yard men to pass out. Then he made sure that the inner door was locked. He passed through the lobby, and locked the outer door. Then he checked.

"One moment. What about my specimens? If the power is off, and cannot be restored . . ."

"There's no immediate hurry," said Cromwell. "The temperature won't alter much in a few hours—and if you ask him nicely, Sergeant Lister will make a temporary repair of the broken cable."

Dr. Trumper opened his mouth as if to reply, then changed his mind and shut it like a trap. He led the way to the gate in the high evergreen hedge and passed through into the dark gardens. The house was in complete darkness, except for a feeble yellow light from one of the rear windows.

The unwelcome visitors were admitted by a side door, and Dr. Trumper led the way to a comfortable study, where a fire was burning brightly, and where several candles were flickering. Johnny made a bee-line for the fire, and started to unfreeze himself.

"Now, Mr. Cromwell," said the doctor grimly, as he turned and faced Ironsides. "Are you comfortable? Pray take the easiest chair—and when you are nicely settled I'd like you to tell me what the hell you were doing in my specimen chamber."

"Well, of course, I didn't want you to know that I had been there, doctor," said the chief inspector, with engaging frankness. "I just wanted to have a look at the place, that's all."

"Why did you want to look at it?"

"Curiosity."

"I must ask you, Cromwell, not to try my patience too severely," shouted the doctor. "You have committed an insufferable act of intrusion. You, a Scotland Yard officer, break into my premises like any ordinary burglar. . . ."

"I wonder if you realise, sir, that I was acting more or less in your own interest?" asked Cromwell, looking the other straight in the eye. "I wanted to satisfy myself about—you. Well, I'm satisfied. Any suspicions I might have had against you are washed out."

"Suspensions?" repeated Dr. Trumper, with a catch in his voice. "Against me? What sort of suspicions?"

"You may know or may not, sir, that several people have been under suspicion with regard to the death of Sir Kenneth Parsloe," replied Cromwell grimly. "As one of the principal figures in the case, doctor, you came under that suspicion. I'm satisfied—now—that you had no hand in murder. That's why I wanted to look over your premises."

"I don't see the connection. What have my premises to do with it?"

"You ought to know that, sir, without my telling you."

Dr. Trumper blinked rapidly, and an uneasy expression swept across his face—mingled, perhaps, with a tinge of relief. Then he assumed another outburst of anger.

"If you think I am satisfied with your nonsensical explanation, Cromwell, you are vastly in error," he said loudly. "You break into my premises, you invade my privacy. . . . Confound you, sir, I'm going to make a serious complaint."

"Now, now, sir, take it easy," advised Ironsides. "I don't think you'll make any complaint. Admitting that I broke into your premises . . ."

"How did you break in?"

"Well, strictly off the record, I picked the lock."

"You compel me to admire your one outstanding quality, Cromwell—and that is your brazen audacity," said the doctor. "You openly confess to picking locks as though you were a professional housebreaker. You picked this lock, I presume, just as you picked the lock of the death-room at Higham Top last night?"

Cromwell looked at Dr. Trumper very hard.

"What was that again?" he asked softly.

The doctor was seized by a fit of coughing. He had realised that he had made a blunder; he had let Cromwell know that he was alarmed on the score of the latter's midnight examination of the dead man.

"After what has happened, Inspector Cromwell, it is quite out of the question for you and I to remain on friendly terms," he said, ignoring the previous remark. "I want you to leave my house at once."

"Sure of that, sir?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought, perhaps, you might like to make a statement," suggested Cromwell casually. "Now is as good a time as any, and if you'll only cool down a bit . . ."

"A statement!" Dr. Trumper looked startled. "May I ask what you mean by that extraordinary remark, Cromwell? Why should I desire to make a statement?"

"Come, come, sir, you don't need to ask that question. I'm giving you an opportunity to be frank. . . ."

"Are you out of your mind?" shouted Dr. Trumper. "In what way do you want me to be frank? Are you having the

effrontery to suggest that Sir Kenneth Parsloe was murdered, and that I had a hand in the crime?"

"You know perfectly well that I'm not suggesting anything of the sort," retorted the chief inspector, who was beginning to lose his patience. "Not ten minutes ago I told you that I was satisfied on that point. All the same, I think you've got something on your mind that's not resting very happily there, and I think you'd feel a lot better if you got rid of it. In a word, I'm inviting you, Dr. Trumper, to come clean."

The doctor, extremely agitated, went to the door and flung it open. His face was working with mingled emotions, and anger seemed to have the upper hand.

"You will get out of my house, Cromwell," he said thickly. "To-morrow I shall communicate with your superiors at Scotland Yard. From the very beginning of this unhappy affair I have maintained that Parsloe died by accident, and nothing has since occurred to make me alter that opinion."

Bill Cromwell shrugged resignedly.

"Well, sir, don't say I didn't give you a good opening," he remarked. "Come on, Johnny. As for communicating with my superiors, there's nothing I can do to stop you, I suppose. I deserve to be dismissed the Force for my carelessness."

"Indeed! So you admit to being careless?"

"I let that steel door, with the spring lock, swing to on me, didn't I? I ought to have been more careful. I left the outer door open, too, and there's a stiffish wind to-night. . . ."

"I see. So that was how the door closed on you?" muttered Trumper. "I had been wondering . . . How very unlucky, my friend. But for that chance you might have got away with this monstrous irregularity without anybody being the wiser."

"That's how things go in this life, sir," sighed Ironsides. "The slightest thing is liable to upset your most carefully laid plans. . . . Not that I need tell you that, sir."

"Is there some inner meaning to that remark?" flared the doctor.

"Take it as you like," shrugged Cromwell, as he and the sergeant moved out into the hall. "Oh, by the way. I thought you were going to spend the evening at Higham Top?"

"I am a doctor, sir, and I have my patients," snapped the other.

"Didn't you leave anybody with Sir Philip?"

"Why should I do that? As a matter of fact, Sir Philip drove me over in his car, and stayed here for an hour or so . . ."

"Leaving at about ten o'clock?"

"Yes, roughly ten o'clock."

"Fine. That's all I wanted to know."

"What do you mean by that remark?" demanded Dr. Trumper angrily. "Good God! You have been cross-examining me, and I never realised it. You have an extraordinarily cunning way with you, inspector."

"So I've been told, sir," said Ironsides dryly.

"You get people to answer your questions before they realise what they're saying. . . ."

"A useful little trick, sir. Not that I can see anything cunning in the questions I've just been asking you. I haven't been trying to trick you, sir. It's your nerves. They're in pretty bad shape. I advise you to get a good night's sleep. . . ."

"To hell with your advice!" snorted the doctor, with sudden fury. "You'll be prescribing a sedative for me next!"

"I could do that, too. I know a good one. . . ."

"Get out!" roared Trumper.

Cromwell was chuckling silently to himself when he and Johnny Lister got out into the open. Glancing back, they could see the tall, stoop-shouldered figure of their late host silhouetted in the open doorway like some great bat. Then he retreated into the house and slammed the door.

"Okay, Johnny. We've got to move—and move fast."

"Here, wait a minute. . . ."

"If you must talk, talk when we've got to the car," snapped Ironsides. "There's not a second to lose."

Johnny, failing to understand the reason for the rush, said no more. They ran down side lanes and across meadows, and finally reached the spot where the car had been parked. They were off within two minutes.

"Now, Old Iron—out with it!" panted the sergeant. "What was all that about? And why did you take that stuff from the man? You let him wipe his boots on you."

"There aren't many back answers, Johnny, when you've been found breaking into a man's property."

"How right you are! And by the same token, old man, the blighter's going to kick up a fine old stink to-morrow. He meant what he said. . . ."

"To-morrow, my Johnny, is a long way off," interrupted Cromwell grimly. "I think a lot of things are going to happen to-night—and some of them will happen to Dr. Trumper. Well, we proved one thing. . . . It wasn't Trumper who shut us in that ice-box. When I casually suggested that the wind

had blown the door too, he swallowed it. I didn't tell him that I'd secured the safety catch."

"This is getting me down," said Johnny Lister. "Everything is becoming as clear as pea soup. You know darned well it wasn't the wind that shut us in . . ."

"It's a pity about that old bird," grumbled Ironsides, frowning. "I gave him a chance to make a frank statement. If he had had any sense he would have taken advantage of the opportunity with both hands."

"He seemed thoroughly rattled."

"You're telling me? Rattled—and scared—and jittery. I didn't want him to know anything about our little jaunt until later. It means that we've got to move fast, and keep on moving. And there's this other job to do first."

"Which other job?"

"The one at Topley Down."

They drove on in silence for a time, until Johnny suddenly asked a question.

"Why did you ask Trumper about Brother Philip?"

"Make a guess."

"And how did you know that Brother Philip had left Trumper's place at ten o'clock? Dash it, Old Iron, you're almost uncanny. . . ."

"Uncanny, my foot. That door was shut on us shortly after ten o'clock . . ."

"You mean—Parsloe did it?"

"Who else?"

"This is only a guess, you know. . . ."

"Guess or not, it's pretty significant. Parsloe left the house at about ten—and a few minutes later we're 'accidentally' shut in. . . ."

"Wait a minute. How did Parsloe know we were there?"

"I don't know," replied Ironsides. "But he must have seen something to arouse his suspicions. He found us in there, he got scared, and shut us in."

"The dirty dog! He believed, of course, that we should be found dead in the morning, and that everybody—Trumper included—would think that we had shut ourselves in by accident?"

"That's about the size of it."

"If that's the case, then, it was Philip who murdered his brother. That much is clear. . . ."

"Think so?"

"What else is there to think? Young Hatherton doesn't

come into the case at all," said Johnny. "He was only a red herring, shoved in by chance to confuse the trail. This blighting Philip, a rolling stone minus moss, got the idea of killing his brother and making it look like an accident. He got Trumper, the family doctor, to kick in with him. Or perhaps it was the other way round."

"Go on. This is good."

"Why shouldn't it be the other way round?" argued the sergeant. "Sir Kenneth, who was thick with Trumper, was rash enough to tell Trumper that he was leaving him twenty-five thousand pounds in his will. Trumper told you he didn't know anything about it, but that's obviously a lie."

"I believe it was a lie, as a matter of fact."

"Well, Trumper gets thinking. He's a doctor. He knows jolly well that Parsloe is good for another twenty years. So that legacy looks like being a wash-out—because Trumper himself won't last twenty. He gets Philip's address from Kenneth and he and Philip go into a huddle. At the right moment Philip comes down here and helps with the dirty work."

"And very nice, too," said Cromwell, with a chuckle. "The only thing against that theory, Johnny, is that everything about it is wrong. You'll find that out before the morning. If everything goes as I expect to-night there won't be any case left by breakfast time. I fancy our mutual pal, Catchpole, is going to get a few surprises."

"He'll have nothing on me," growled Johnny. "Ironsides, if I had a blunt instrument handy, I'd hit you with it. You're the most exasperating cuss I've ever known. And it doesn't make me happier when I realise that I've been with you all the time, and that I've had the same opportunities of seeing things as you have. Yet you've got this case sewn up, and I'm floundering about in the dark. It occurs to me sometimes that I'm only half-witted."

"Only sometimes, Johnny? It occurs to me about five times a day."

"All right—I asked for that!" growled the sergeant. "I suppose I'd better shut up. No good asking you to tell me what's in that poison-pot of a mind of yours, anyhow."

Very shortly afterwards they reached a cottage on the outskirts of the village of Topley Down in which lived the village constable—and which was, officially, the police station. They found Inspector Catchpole and a number of stolid-looking strong-armed constables from outlying districts.

"Glad to see you, sir," said Catchpole, rising and stretching himself. "It's a bit later than you said . . ."

"Yes, we were delayed. Got your men ready?" Ironsides inspected the men and nodded. "Fine. The sooner we're off, the better."

"But where are we going, Mr. Cromwell?"

"We're going," replied Bill Cromwell, "to dig up a coffin."

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN CHURCHYARDS YAWN . . .

INSPECTOR CATCHPOLE'S fat and florid face, after expressing complete blankness for a moment, showed indications of intelligence and understanding.

"Dig up a coffin, eh?" he repeated. "So that's why you ordered those spades and things? They're in the car outside in the yard . . . But what's the big idea, Mr. Cromwell? Whose body are we going to dig up? And why?" He became somewhat aggrieved. "Aren't you keeping me in the dark more than necessary, sir?"

"I've been hard at work, and I haven't had time to send you telegrams every five minutes," retorted Cromwell tartly.

"I can tell you this much . . . Sir Philip Parsloe was probably on the scene of that car crash last night. The deuce of it is, I can't prove it just yet. . . ."

"But he said he arrived last night from the continent."

"He's a liar. Our people have checked every cross-Channel steamer, and every in-coming plane. No trace of him. He arrived at the Dorchester late in the evening, saying that he had just got in from Paris. Nobody doubted his word, of course. . . . Amazing, how these amateur dabblers in crime make the most elementary and footling blunders."

Catchpole was startled.

"Did you say crime, sir? Sir Philip Parsloe?"

"Perhaps I was wrong . . ."

"Well, murder's a crime," said Catchpole, "and this Parsloe man will be in a nasty fix to-morrow unless he can answer the questions I'm going to put to him."

"If you'll only stop talking, and get to work, you'll be able to put those questions to him to-night," said Ironsides. "In

fact, the sooner we can get to him the better. But this other little job must be done first. Where's the churchyard?"

"Just outside the village, near the top of the hill."

"Any cottages nearby?"

"No, it's a lonely spot."

"All the better. We don't want to be interrupted by inquisitive villagers. Take a look at this."

Catchpole opened his eyes wider as he looked at the document which Ironsides had produced.

"It's a Home Office order, authorising us to open the grave of Simon Biggintree, and exhume the remains . . . Who on earth is Simon Biggintree? And what's he got to do with this case?" He looked at the document again. "Why, the man died in April of last year. That's pretty nearly ten months ago. . . . It's not going to be a pleasant job, sir."

"But it's a job that's got to be done."

"Who was this man, sir—and how can his death, ten months ago, possibly be connected with the murder of Sir Kenneth Parsloe?" asked Catchpole. "I don't understand . . . Oh, but wait a minute! Another murder, eh? The Home Office doesn't make an order like this unless there's some suspicion that the death wasn't in order."

"That's usually the case," agreed Cromwell. "Well, let's be going."

It was while they were driving out of the village to the churchyard—which was a mile away—that Inspector Catchpole returned to a recital of his grievances.

"It's a bit thick, Mr. Cromwell—honestly it is," he wheezed. "I'm supposed to be in charge of this case, aren't I? And here I am, knowing practically nothing, and fooling about with a lot of loose ends, and you seem to know everything. Now, all of a sudden, we're going to exhume a dead man who hasn't even been mentioned in the case."

"If you'd worked with the old blighter as long as I have, inspector, you wouldn't be surprised at anything," remarked Johnny Lister. "I'm just as much in the dark as you are—and I've been with him more than you have."

"This man Biggintree? Who was he?"

"A farmer in this district," replied Cromwell. "Quite an important man in his way. Died suddenly and unexpectedly while he was dipping some sheep. . . ."

"Sheep-dipping in April, sir?"

"Don't they do that sort of thing to sheep in April?" retorted Ironsides. "Probably a special case . . . Anyhow,

he was dipping sheep, whether it was the right time of year or not. Heeled over without warning and when they picked him up he was dead. Heart failure was the coroner's verdict."

"And he was buried in the ordinary way?"

"Yes."

"Last April?"

"Last April."

"Not long enough," puffed Catchpole dubiously. "I wouldn't mind digging up a corpse that's been buried for ten or twenty years . . . I don't mind skeletons. But last April . . . ! Looks like being a nasty job."

"You're not making it any better by these gruesome hints and suggestions," growled Cromwell. "Well, here we are, by the look of it. Yes, this is a nice quiet spot. We ought to be able to do the job without anybody being the wiser. Tell your men to go easy with their lights. Are the lanterns shaded, as I ordered? Good!"

Inspector Catchpole climbed out of the car near the churchyard with a little tingle of excitement. He was still very exasperated by Cromwell's secretiveness, and he was obliged to formulate a theory of his own. And it seemed to him that there was only one possible theory.

Simon Biggintree had died suddenly . . . Sir Kenneth Parsloe had died suddenly. Obviously, Cromwell had reason to suspect that the injury to Sir Kenneth's head was not the actual cause of death. What was the alternative? Poison! And if Sir Kenneth had been poisoned, Biggintree had been poisoned. . . .

Another thought occurred to Catchpole, and it was a startling one. Dr. Trumper! It was more than likely that Dr. Trumper had been Biggintree's medical attendant. . . . After all, country doctors extend their practices through many outlying villages. Dr. Trumper had vehemently insisted that Parsloe had died by accident, and was ready to sign a death certificate to that effect. In all probability he had signed Biggintree's death certificate. . . . And they were going to dig up Biggintree's remains in order to make sure. No doubt a celebrated Home Office pathologist was on his way from London already and would arrive later. . . .

Poison!

It was a grim, sinister word. All his life, Inspector Catchpole had been hoping that a day would come when he would be in charge of an important murder case. And this one looked like being a real sensation. He pictured Dr. Trumper in his mind's eye, and that strange looking gentleman took on the

shape and character of some grisly ghoul—a fiend in human shape who poisoned people while pretending to succour them in their ailments.

“Not the first one, either,” muttered Catchpole tensely. “There was Palmer . . . Crippen . . . several of them. Good lord! For all we know, this man may have been poisoning all sorts of people! He certainly had plenty of reason to poison Parsloe, seeing that he comes into twenty-five thousand. . . . Wonder what his motive was in murdering Biggintree?”

“Talking to me, inspector?” asked Johnny Lister.

“Eh? No. Thinking, that’s all,” wheezed Catchpole. “I say, young feller, this thing is beginning to look damned ugly.”

“Even uglier than that,” agreed Johnny.

There was no time for further conversation. The little party silently made its way to a far corner of the picturesque old churchyard. Cromwell was glad to note that high hedges on one side and trees on the other completely screened the operations. Dimly visible among the trees was the squat, square tower of the ancient Norman church.

“What about the vicar?” asked Catchpole. “Has he been told about this?”

“No.”

“Isn’t it usual to tell the vicar . . . ?”

“It may be usual, but I do things in a different way,” interrupted Ironsides belligerently. “If you think I want a fussy clergyman fooling about here while we’re busy on the job, you’re greatly mistaken. He’d be one hell of a hindrance. And do you think he’d have kept it a secret if we *had* told him? By this time we should have had half the village round the churchyard. No need to tell the vicar until to-morrow.”

“I daresay you’re right, sir, but I hope you’ll be the one to explain things to the vicar in the morning,” said Catchpole. “I don’t think he’ll be very cordial.”

Ironsides only grunted. He looked about him again, and was satisfied. It was one of the loneliest churchyards he had ever seen, with yew trees rising eerily towards the night sky. All around them loomed the headstones of the graves. Some slanted crazily with age; others were half-covered with mossy growths, their inscriptions obliterated by wind and rain of centuries. Others were comparatively new. . . .

“Cheery sort of spot,” commented Johnny Lister, with a shiver.

"If you're feeling cold, you can handle one of these picks," said Cromwell shortly. "The ground's going to be pretty hard on the surface, with this frost. . . . Is this the grave? Yes. They apparently thought a lot of Mr. Simon Biggintree."

He was looking at the fine, massive marble headstone which had been erected at the top of the grave. It must have cost a lot of money.

"Died of heart failure, did he?" said Catchpole sceptically.

"That's what the doctor's certificate said."

"Who was the doctor—Trumper?"

"Now," said Ironsides, "that's an idea."

"Hadn't you thought of it?" asked Catchpole eagerly.

"Am I one ahead of you, sir? Lots of people have had 'heart failure'—or long medical words meaning the same thing—on their death certificates by incompetent doctors. Or crooked doctors," he added suggestively.

"Stop guessing, inspector."

"But I'm getting warm, aren't I?"

"You'll get a darned sight warmer if you take hold of one of these picks and get busy," retorted Cromwell. "What do you want me to do—show you the way?"

He was as good as his word, and wielded a pickaxe with surprising energy for some minutes. After that, he allowed the burly constables to get on with the work while he took a breather. The stout Mr. Catchpole made no attempt to work at all.

"At one time this evening, Catchpole, I didn't think I should be able to keep this appointment," remarked Ironsides casually.

"That's what I thought, sir. You were a bit late. . . ."

"Shall I tell you why we were late?"

"Breakdown on the road, sir?"

"Nothing so ordinary as that. My sergeant, here, and I were nearly done in. Somebody tried to murder us."

"Here, you don't mean. . . . Not really!"

"I should have been as good as dead right now if Johnny hadn't had a brainwave and started firing at electric cables with my gun."

"Firing at electric cables!" ejaculated Catchpole. "You're kidding, aren't you, sir? Who on earth would try to kill you? Here, wait a minute! Trumper!"

"Not Trumper. Parsloe."

"Sir Philip Parsloe tried to kill you?" gurgled the stout inspector. "This is too bad, Mr. Cromwell! Why didn't you

tell me about it before? You're late for your appointment, and you don't give any explanation. . . ."

"I'm giving it now, aren't I? It seems to me, inspector, that you've been doing some bad guessing, and it's about time I put you right on a few points. It was Dr. Trumper who saved our lives. . . ."

"Dr. Trumper! But I thought . . . That seems all wrong to me, sir. And didn't you say, a minute or two ago, that it was Sergeant Lister who saved you? Honestly, Mr. Cromwell, you can be awfully exasperating when you like."

"Sorry," grunted Ironsides. "I ought to have told you that Trumper came to our rescue in consequence of Johnny's brainwave. Like to hear the details?"

"Very much," said Catchpole eagerly.

While the grave-diggers continued their laborious work, Cromwell talked. He felt justified in giving Catchpole the facts now, because he was wasting no time in doing so.

"We've got no proof that it was Parsloe who shut us in that damned place, but I'm not worrying about that for the moment," concluded Ironsides. "In any case, we can't do anything with Brother Philip until we've had a look inside this coffin. For all I know, I may be a blundering fool, and the result of this exhumation may be quite different from the one I expect."

"Like to bet on that?" asked Johnny quickly.

"I don't understand about this queer refrigerating chamber, sir," said Catchpole, puzzled. "Do you mean to say you would have been dead by the morning if you hadn't been released? I didn't know cold storage plants were as dangerous as all that."

"This isn't an ordinary cold storage plant. There's no ventilation, for one thing, and it's comparatively small. . . ."

"Wow!" yelped Catchpole suddenly.

"What now?" asked Cromwell irritably. "Must you make those animal noises? Did something bite you. . . .?"

"Listen, Mr. Cromwell," wheezed Catchpole urgently. "You've forgotten something. If Dr. Trumper is mixed up in this business—and I don't see anything else—he must have gone straight to Higham Top. He must have told Sir Philip that he had let you out?"

"What about it?"

"What about it!" echoed the stout inspector frantically. "Why, by this time Parsloe will have bolted. If he tried to murder you like that, it stands to reason that it was he who

murdered his brother. Surely, Mr. Cromwell, it would only have been ordinary prudence to have arrested Parsloe before you came out here on this job."

"Perhaps you'll tell me how I could have arrested him—and on what charge?"

"Attempted murder, of course. That would have put him under lock and key. . . ."

"I told you before, I haven't a scrap of proof against the man," interrupted Ironsides. "I'm certain it was he who locked us in with the object of killing us—and young Lister is just as certain. But suspicion isn't any good. Parsloe knows that as well as I do. Parsloe knows that there's no case against him—and Dr. Trumper was under the impression that we had got shut in by accident. Calm yourself, inspector. Parsloe won't bolt—not to-night, anyway. All the same, I'm not going to lose any time in having a chat with his ribs."

"You're not losing time now, are you?"

"No. There are certain things I want to say to Parsloe, and I can't say 'em until I've had a look into Simon Biggin-tree's coffin. Maybe I won't be able to say those things at all. If I find what I expect to find. . . ."

"Traces of poison, eh, sir?"

"If I find what I expect to find," repeated Cromwell deliberately, "then we can go along to Higham Top and talk to Parsloe in the right kind of language."

"You mean you'll talk to him, sir?" growled Catchpole. "Don't drag me into it, please! As far as I can see, I'm nothing but a spectator."

He moved aside to superintend the digging work, a very disgruntled man. Now that the hard frozen surface had been removed, the task was easier. The soil proved to be soft, with a gravel basis. It was quickly shovelled out. The great pile of earth beside the open grave grew in size as the diggers descended further into the earth.

Cromwell and Johnny Lister took a hand now and again—as much to keep themselves warm as to relieve the others. And during all this time there had been no disturbance—no interference by inquisitive witnesses.

"Another ten minutes, I should say," remarked Cromwell, a note of anxiety creeping into his voice. "I'm getting a bit worried, Johnny. I've built up a theory in connection with this case, and it's going to stand or fall by the result of this exhumation."

"What do you really want to look at the body for?"

"I don't want to look at it."

"You don't want to look at the body?" ejaculated Johnny, staring.

"I just said so."

"Then what's the idea of digging up the coffin? Aren't you going to open it?"

"Yes, I'm going to open it."

"If you weren't my superior officer, Old Iron, I'd kick you where it hurts the most," snorted the exasperated sergeant.

"I think I'll kick you, anyway."

He was diverted from this pleasing idea by the announcement that the coffin had been reached.

"No need to get it right out," said Ironsides. "Clear all that loose earth away from the lid. That's right. Hand me a pick, Johnny—and hold one of those lanterns low so that I can see what I'm doing."

Bill Cromwell, as energetic as a schoolboy, lowered himself into the grave and stood on the foot of the coffin. He brushed away the last remnants of loose earth and prepared to use the pick.

"Here, what are you up to?" asked Catchpole. "We ought to have brought rope and pulleys and tackle. . . . Hey, you're not going to smash the coffin lid in with that pick, are you?"

"Watch me!" said Ironsides.

Crash!

"You mustn't do that, sir!" panted Catchpole, horrified. "Haven't you any respect for the dead at all? No wonder you didn't want the vicar to be here."

"To get this coffin out would take another hour, and I'm not going to waste all that time," said Ironsides. "I'm only doing this because I know what I'm going to find. . . ." He paused, and shut his eyes for a moment. "God help me if I'm wrong!"

Crash!

The pick came down again, this time with tremendous force. The coffin lid, partially rotted, but still stout, cracked and splintered. Inspector Catchpole and Johnny Lister crouched over the grave, watching with fascinated interest. The other men leaned over, aghast at this sacrilege. Only a few inches below that layer of wood lay the remains of a dead man, and Cromwell, without the slightest respect, was smashing the coffin open with a pick!

"I'd like to say, Mr. Cromwell, that I disapprove of this thing altogether," puffed Catchpole excitedly. "I don't want

to be associated with it. I hope you realise that this poor man has been dead for less than a year?"

"Unless I've made the biggest blunder of my life, there's nothing particularly horrible inside this coffin, inspector," said Ironsides, as he wrenched at a splintered chunk of lid. "Ah!" It was a long drawn out sound of satisfaction and relief. "I knew I couldn't have been mistaken, . . . And yet . . . Well, anyway, I was right." He glanced up at Johnny Lister with a twisted grin. "Shine the lamp, Sam!"

The sergeant, startled as much by Cromwell's change of manner as by his unholy actions, bent farther over the cavity and focused a powerful torchlight into the broken coffin. Inspector Catchpole leaned over, too—and he was so staggered that he nearly fell headlong. He made a queer gobbling noise before he could articulate any intelligible words.

"The body!" he squeaked. "In God's name, where's the body?"

"There doesn't seem to be one," said Cromwell complacently.

"No corpse!" gurgled Johnny Lister.

"Not even a skeleton," replied Ironsides, as he tore another piece of the lid away and revealed blank emptiness—except for the torn remains of the coffin's once-rich lining. "No, nothing here. Take a look for yourselves."

It seemed, in that tense moment, that a great shadow had been lifted; the eeriness of the situation, the graveyard atmosphere, vanished. Johnny Lister had an uncontrollable desire to laugh. There was something absurd, something farcical, in the whole affair.

"Well, I'm damned!" Inspector Catchpole mopped the cold sweat off his brow, and the look he bestowed upon Cromwell was one very akin to awe. "A fake burial, eh? And you knew it all the time, sir. Now I can understand why you weren't particular about smashing in the coffin. . . . It would have been a nasty shock, though, if your guess had been wrong."

"I'm pretty good at guesses," retorted Ironsides dryly. "Better than you are, inspector. That last guess of yours, for example. . . . There wasn't any fake burial."

"I don't see how you can say that, sir," protested the stout inspector. "There's no body in the coffin, so what else was it but a fake burial?"

"When the late lamented Mr. Biggintree was laid to rest he was well and truly inside this coffin," said Ironsides. "But I didn't expect to find him in here."

"Still as mysterious as ever, eh?" said Johnny Lister. "Perhaps you'll tell us how the body vanished? And why? And when? Perhaps you'll tell us something that'll make sense out of all this jiggery pokery."

Cromwell hauled himself out of the grave.

"I formed a theory about the Parsloe case as early as last night, and as far as I'm concerned there's no longer any mystery," he said, as he pulled out his pipe and rammed tobacco into the bowl. "I couldn't make any definite move, though, until I had uncovered this piece of evidence. Remember how I told you a few minutes ago, Johnny, that I didn't want to look at the body? That was one of the truest things I've ever said—because if there *had* been a body in this coffin my theory would have blown a fuse."

"Well, this beats everything," said Catchpole. "You won't be able to surprise me any more, Mr. Cromwell. I don't know where we go from here . . ."

"Yes, you do. To Higham Top. I told you that before we started digging. It's not much after midnight, and I want to have a little chat with the Parsloe gent before he goes to bed. You'd better get your men to tidy up here—although they needn't fill in the grave again."

"But when the vicar sees this in the morning he'll have a dozen paralytic fits," objected Johnny. "He'll think he's back in the old body-snatching days."

"I'll get word to the vicar—or see him myself—first thing in the morning, before he's had time to set foot outside the vicarage," replied Cromwell. "Johnny, this case is practically over. We can act now."

"I'm glad to hear that," sniffed the sergeant. "Everything is now beautifully clear."

"What beats me," said Catchpole, scratching his head, "is why you were so certain that you wouldn't find any dead man in this coffin, Mr. Cromwell."

"I was certain, because it's against all the laws of nature for a dead body to be in two places at one and the same time," retorted Ironsides grimly. "If that doesn't give you a hint, then I'm sorry for your intelligence."

"Look here, sir, if you're suggesting that the body at Higham Top is the body of Simon Biggintree—and that's what you . . . to be suggesting—then either I'm crazy, or you're crazy," said the stout inspector hotly. "And I know darned well I'm not crazy. Biggintree died over ten months ago, and you're not going to tell me . . . Unless, of course," he added,

suddenly cooling down, "the man took some kind of poison that preserved him all these months."

Bill Cromwell only smiled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DEATH IN A MAN'S EYES

IT WAS rather a wonder that Dr. Benjamin Trumper did not hurl himself to destruction as he drove along the icy, treacherous roads to Higham Top. For if ever a man was in a panic, he was in one. The extraordinary events of the late evening, and their portent, had unnerved him. The strain had been great for more than forty-eight hours; and now, this final shock, indicating as it did that Chief Inspector Cromwell was hot on the trail of the truth, reduced the country practitioner to a state of mind which was tantamount to terror.

How much did Cromwell know?

That was the thought which kept drumming in his head. What Cromwell suspected, what he guessed, did not matter. Suspicions and guesswork are useless in police investigation . . . How much did Cromwell *know*?

A climax was at hand. That much was certain. The doctor had an awful, frightening feeling that his recent bluffing had failed in its purpose. The very fact that Cromwell had been inside the cold storage plant was an indication of the detective's knowledge.

More than once Dr. Trumper had been on the point of abandoning everything and taking to panic flight. He would have to sacrifice his home, his practice, his experimental laboratory and plant . . . and his great ambitions. Flight, moreover, would in itself be an admission of guilt.

"Why should I give everything up?" he muttered, again and again. "I've done nothing. . . . It was Parsloe's plan. I've got to see him. Perhaps he'll know what to do."

Thus, after wasting a considerable amount of time, he had got out his car and was now driving like a madman through the village of Higham St. Andrew. It was so late that not a light was gleaming from any window. All the good people of that quiet Surrey village were in bed and asleep. It occurred to Dr. Trumper, with some relief, that the servants at Higham

Top would be in bed and asleep, too. But Parsloe wouldn't be in bed. Not yet. It wasn't as late as all that.

He was right. When he came within sight of the fine old house he saw that one or two lights were glowing from the lower windows. The curtains of the library window, he noticed, were drawn right back, allowing the light to splash out across the snow-powdered lawn. As he stopped the car and jumped out he was half-inclined to go to the library window and gain admittance that way, since it would save time. But no; somebody might see him, and his action would appear peculiar....

So he rang the bell in the ordinary way, fully expecting that the door would be opened by Parsloe in person. It wasn't. When the door opened, Trumper was confronted by Beale.

"Oh, I thought . . . Hallo, Beale," said the doctor, almost stupidly. "I expected you to be in bed. . . . Where's your master?"

The butler looked at him strangely.

"Sir Philip is in the library, sir . . ."

"Of course he's in the library—I knew he was in the library," interrupted Trumper, pushing his way in. "I saw the lights in the window as I came along."

"Is anything wrong, sir?"

"Wrong? Why should anything be wrong?"

"You don't look very well, sir. . . ."

"Nonsense! I'm perfectly well," snapped the doctor, making a great effort and pulling himself together. "Don't stand there gaping at me, man."

It was a fact that Beale was gaping. He had never seen Dr. Trumper in this condition before. Always an unusual looking man, the doctor was now almost grotesque—with his hatless head revealing his untidy hair, with his overcoat buttoned so that it was all askew—and a look of feverish delirium in his eyes. Not a pleasant spectacle to confront any butler at such a late hour.

"I am very sorry, sir," said Beale hastily. "I wasn't aware that I was gaping. I was just going to bed. It is a good deal past my usual hour, but I thought that Sir Philip, perhaps . . . Have you had bad news, sir?"

"No, I haven't had bad news," retorted Trumper, as he took impatient strides towards the library. "I'm worried, that's all . . . A patient of mine . . . Very grave case . . . No, you needn't trouble to come with me, Beale."

He burst into the library like a young tornado, crashing the door closed. He found Sir Philip Parsloe standing midway

between the fireplace and the door, with a well-filled whisky glass in his hand, and a look of anger in his eyes.

"What was all that out there with Beale?" he asked harshly. "Are you out of your mind, Trumper? Why do you come bursting in on me like this? Was it necessary to make a fool of yourself in front of Beale?"

"There's something I must tell you . . ."

"Out with it, then," snapped Parsloe, rocking slightly as he half turned.

"You've been drinking. . . ."

"What if I have? I'm in my own house, and I'm drinking my own whisky. What did you come to say?"

Finding himself face to face with this obviously half-intoxicated man, Dr. Trumper recovered a good deal of his own poise. He had not expected anything like this. The baronet's face was flushed to a muddy, unhealthy hue, and his eyes were bloodshot and wild. For some vague reason the doctor was filled with a sense of foreboding.

"Steady, Parsloe," said Trumper sharply. "I had no idea that I should find you in this condition. You had better be careful with that stuff. You've had more than enough . . ."

He broke off as Sir Philip emptied his glass at a gulp, and refilled it from the decanter.

"Say what you've got to say, and get out!" he muttered thickly. "You've already told the whole house, judging by the way you were shouting out in the hall. Who let you in? Beale? I thought Beale had gone to bed."

"I thought he would have been in bed, too; but the thing I have to tell you is so important that I could not possibly risk using the telephone . . ."

"Couldn't it have waited until the morning?" interrupted Parsloe angrily. "Good God, man, you look panic-stricken." He peered forward half stupidly, and blinked. "Have you no more sense than to come here in such a state? What will Beale think? We've already had enough trouble . . ."

"Beale thinks nothing. I told him I was worried about a patient. . . ."

"Do you suppose he believed you? Well, get on with it. What's on your mind?"

"Cromwell's on my mind," said Trumper tensely.

There was a silence. Sir Philip, in the act of raising the whisky glass to his lips, paused. He stared straight into the other's eyes—and his own eyes were unnaturally cold with an awful fury.

"What about Cromwell?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"We thought he'd gone to London. We thought he had left the case in the hands of that dull-witted Catchpole. And to-night I find Cromwell and his assistant locked up in my cold storage plant."

"You found them there?" shouted Parsloe furiously. "Didn't you tell me, before I left your house this evening, that you wouldn't be going to the place again until to-morrow?"

"I might have done . . ."

"Might have done, be damned. You did tell me so. Why the hell did you go there this evening?"

"I had to go there," replied Trumper, staring at the other strangely. "What's the matter with you, Parsloe? You've acting as though you know something about this queer business. . . . All the lights in my house went out, and when I went to the power house I found that the main fuses had blown."

"I don't see . . ."

"There was nothing wrong in the house, so I went to the cold storage plant, thinking that the trouble was there," said the doctor impatiently. "It was there—plenty of it—in the shape of Cromwell. He'd put a couple of bullets through the power cable and caused a short circuit."

"Tell me one thing, Trumper," said the other, in a low, vibrant voice. "Did you let Cromwell out?"

"Let him out? Naturally I let him out. What else was there for me to do?"

"You blasted, blundering fool!" said Sir Philip, advancing upon the doctor with such menace in his manner that the latter shrank back.

"Control yourself, man, for God's sake," said Trumper hastily. "What's the matter with you? I couldn't help Cromwell getting into the place, could I? I don't understand." He was looking at Parsloe with a kind of rising horror. "You're not taking this at all as I expected. It's natural that you should be alarmed, yes. But why look at me so malevolently? It's obvious that Cromwell is suspicious, or he wouldn't have broken into the cold storage house. . . ."

"You say he broke in? I wondered . . . Don't imagine you are giving me any news, Trumper. Cromwell's dangerous, I appreciated that from the first, and I realised it more than ever to-night."

Parsloe broke off, drank some more whisky, and paced the room.

"This is hell!" he went on. "How long ago did this happen? What did Cromwell say? Where did he go? Don't stand there like a dummy. . . ."

"Wait—wait," interrupted the doctor hoarsely. "Let me understand one thing clearly, Parsloe. Am I mad? Am I imagining things—or are you telling me that you were aware of Cromwell's predicament? Unless I am going completely out of my mind your words and your manner suggest that the door did not accidentally close upon Cromwell and Lister. . . ."

"Must we keep up this farce?" snapped Parsloe. "Of course I closed the door on them. If you had not gone interfering they would have been dead by the morning. . . ."

"I did not go interfering," protested the other. "Haven't I told you that my lights went out, and that I went to the cold storage plant to see. . . ." He broke off and sank limply into the nearest chair. "Dead by the morning! That's what you said, isn't it? Are you mad, Parsloe?"

"When I left your house to-night it was very dark," said Sir Philip unsteadily. "You shut the door at once—do you remember? As I was walking to my car I thought I saw a faint glimmer of light at the bottom of your garden, through a crevice in the trees. I don't know why I did so, but I walked across the garden and took a closer look. I found the outer door of your precious plant slightly ajar, and the light from the inner chamber was escaping. . . . I couldn't understand it. I slipped into the lobby and heard voices. . . . Cromwell and Lister were inside the place. The safety catch of the inner door was in the 'safety' position. I silently altered it and slammed the door."

"Knowing full well what you were doing?" whispered Trumper. "Knowing that you were shutting those two men in to certain death?"

"An accident," retorted Sir Philip. "Can't you get that into your head, Trumper? An accident. You know Cromwell's reputation as well as I do; he's a man who takes risks, a man who flouts red tape."

"Yes, but. . . ."

"Let me finish. If Cromwell had been armed with a search warrant he would have come to you openly and demanded to be shown over the premises. But Cromwell didn't do that. He picked the lock—clear proof that he was acting in a highly irregular manner. While he and his assistant were inside, the door 'accidentally' swung to on them. Very unfortunate. No blame attaching itself to you, or anybody else. You could

have proved quite easily that you had been nowhere near the plant."

"But—it was *murder*!" whispered Trumper, shivering.

"It was a sure way of safeguarding ourselves," corrected Parsloe harshly. "Cromwell had no search warrant in his pocket, and the official inquiry after his supposed accidental death would have proved that. It would have seemed perfectly clear to the authorities that he had acted with gross irregularity and had suffered death for his pains. Unpleasant for you, Trumper, but that couldn't be helped. I wasn't going to tell you anything about it until to-morrow."

"You shut those two men up," muttered the doctor pallidly. "You left them in there to die." He half rose, staring at Sir Philip in horror. "That's murder," he added shrilly. "God Almighty, Parsloe, that's nothing but cold-blooded murder."

"Control yourself, you fool. Damned squeamish all of a sudden, aren't you? You've gone pretty far with me. . . ."

"Yes, yes, but this is something entirely different. I didn't mind taking a few risks. . . ."

"Cromwell was becoming dangerous. Do you think I was going to see all our plans shipwrecked because of the impudent interference of a Scotland Yard officer who was flouting all regulations?"

"Does that alter the fact? You were going to kill them. It's horrible, Parsloe. I tell you, man, it's horrible. I never agreed to help you in anything like this."

"The situation arose unexpectedly. . . ."

"I don't care how it arose," almost shouted Dr. Trumper wildly. "I'm not going through with this dirty business, Parsloe. I wash my hands of it. I won't be a party. . . ."

He shrank back with a little whimpering cry—a sound which came strangely from so big a man—as Parsloe advanced upon him with an expression in his eyes that carried death. Trumper had never seen such an expression in a man's eyes before, and he had good reason to know that his companion was dangerous and desperate.

"Not so fast, Trumper," said Parsloe softly. "It's too late for you to back out. We entered this little game together and we're going through with it together."

"But not murder. . . ."

"Don't be such a rat. Pull yourself together and answer my questions. Where did Cromwell go after he'd left you?"

"I don't know. I was very angry. I ordered him out of my

house. . . ." The doctor grew panicky again. "Can't you understand, Parsloe, that there's *nothing* we can do? Cromwell must have a good idea of the truth, or he would have had no reason to go to the cold storage plant."

"Wait—wait. Let me think. Cromwell's different. . . . He has a way of keeping things to himself—of acting alone. He's got himself into trouble lots of times because of that weakness of his. . . . What was the time when you let him out?"

"Roughly about half-past ten. . . ."

"Over two hours ago," said Parsloe quickly. "If he had intended doing anything to-night he would have been here before now. He's not going to act until the morning, Trumper. I heard him talking about the Green Dragon. . . . It's my guess he's staying at the Green Dragon for to-night."

"But I don't see . . ."

"Here, take a stiff drink," said Parsloe. "There's work to be done. I'm going to the Green Dragon to settle with Cromwell and that young fellow with him. You're coming, too. . . ."

"No, no."

"You're coming with me," snapped Sir Philip.

"Parsloe, you are completely insane," said Dr. Trumper, the peril of his position giving him unexpected strength—and dignity. "What you are suggesting is cold-blooded murder, and I will not be a party to it. In heaven's name, isn't it time for us to cry 'halt'? Rather than take this mad, fatal step, Parsloe, I urge you to go to Cromwell frankly and tell him the absolute truth."

"Now, of course, you are merely drivelling. . . ."

"No, I am not. Forestall him, Parsloe—go to him and make a clean breast of everything. I'll do the same. It is our only possible chance."

"Have you forgotten Hatherton?"

"Hatherton?" Dr. Trumper started. "But Hatherton's been re-arrested. . . ."

"And what will Hatherton's reactions be if I do as you say and undo all that we have done?" interrupted Sir Philip impatiently. "Understand this, Trumper—and let it sink in. We've got to silence Cromwell and his assistant before they take anybody else into their confidence."

"And I refuse," said the doctor instantly. "No, no, Parsloe, it's no good looking at me like that." He drew himself up to his full height and was hardly aware of the fact that he was trembling from head to foot. "Until to-night I have worked with you enthusiastically—even eagerly. But no

longer, Parsloe. For me, this is the finish. If you are not going to the police, I am. . . ."

"I don't think so," interrupted Parsloe, picking up a long-bladed paper-knife from his desk and holding it by the tip.

"Guns are very noisy, Trumper. This isn't noisy."

"Now I know you are mad," said the doctor huskily. "Put that thing down, you lunatic. Please, Parsloe," he added earnestly. "You're drunk. That's what's the matter with you. You've had too much of that whisky. . . ."

"I shouldn't advise you to edge nearer to the door, Trumper," broke in Sir Philip. "You're not going to get away so easily. I can throw this thing very accurately."

Something cracked inside the doctor's head.

"Help!" he screamed, making a rush for the door. "Beale—Beale! Help!"

He did not realise that he was so stricken with panic that his voice hardly rose above a croak. With a curse, Parsloe sprang to his feet and hurled the dagger. . . . Half-way to the door Dr. Trumper pitched forward, his loose, ungainly body hitting the carpet and rolling over grotesquely. He finished up in a limp, silent heap.

"The hopeless fool!" muttered Parsloe, shaken.

He walked unsteadily to the spot where Trumper had fallen. He had never intended to throw the dagger. His threat had been idle. He had done so automatically, as it had been the only thing in his hand—and it had been vitally necessary to stop Trumper's outcry.

He bent down—and swore. He swore, not because the other was dead, but because he had, himself, been so scared. There was nothing much wrong with Trumper. The dagger, far from having been flung accurately, had merely struck the running man on the back of the head—and with the hilt, at that. The scalp was not even grazed, and there was no blood. So much for Sir Philip's boasted knife-throwing prowess. . . .

He rose to his feet uncertainly, and stood listening. Then he went across to the door and softly opened it. He took a step or two out into the hall, listening again. The great house was completely silent.

Satisfied, Parsloe returned and took another drink. He had reached the stage of complete recklessness. While a trifle unsteady, his brain was nevertheless clear, and he was capable of thinking as well as ever. The whisky was in his brain, in his blood. . . . He was ripe for any mischief.

He picked up the paper-knife—which was in reality a

formidable dagger—and ran his finger along the edge. It is doubtful if Parsloe, completely sober, would have seriously considered the task of going after a man like Chief Inspector Cromwell with a dagger. Drink, and plenty of it, had robbed him of his sense of proportion.

He went across to the doctor again, and frowned. He could not very well go off and leave the man littered all over the library floor. He poured some neat brandy into Trumper's mouth, and after a few minutes the signs were encouraging. Shortly afterwards, Trumper was sitting up and blinking.

"Pull yourself together, Trumper," urged Sir Philip. "I'm sorry about what happened. . . ."

"Oh, Parsloe, it's you. My head feels uncommonly painful . . . Ooooh!" The doctor had passed a hand over his head with agonising results. "Did I have a fall? I don't seem to remember . . ."

"You were making a fool of yourself, and I had to do something to stop you," said the other, as he helped Trumper to his feet. "Here, sit in this chair."

"I'm injured . . ."

"No, you're not. It's only a bruise. Drink this."

"You had to do something to stop me?" repeated Trumper, making an effort to remember. "Stop me from doing what? I don't understand . . ."

"It was only the paper-knife—the hilt struck you on the back of the head."

"Yes, yes—as I was trying to get to the door," muttered the doctor, pausing in the act of drinking more brandy and looking at Parsloe with sudden realisation. "You threw that dagger at me. You tried to kill me. . . ."

"Nonsense. You were shouting like a maniac, and I didn't want all the servants to come down. I acted as much for your protection as my own. Do you think I want to let my servants into our secrets?"

Dr. Benjamin Trumper was no longer in a condition to resist. His head was giving him very great pain, and the blow had taken all the courage out of him. He sat in the chair, looking at his companion in much the same way as a frightened rabbit might look at a snake.

"Whatever you have decided to do, Parsloe, don't do it," he whispered fearfully. "Wait until you have sobered down. You're drunk—you don't know it, but you're crazy drunk."

"I think I have drunk just enough to make the whole thing easy," retorted Parsloe recklessly. "Beale and all the other

servants are in bed, and we're going to sink or swim by the result of to-night's activities. Don't let's have any more quarrelling. We're going into this thing together. We've got to be sensible."

A strange look came over Dr. Trumper's face as he stared beyond Sir Philip Parsloe's shoulder at the window, which was uncurtained—and into his eyes there came a light of inexpressible relief.

"Yes, Parsloe," he said, in a whisper. "You're quite right. We've got to be sensible now."

Parsloe stared at him blankly for a moment, then, seeing the direction of his gaze, swung round—and checked, frozen.

Standing outside the window was Bill Cromwell.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE DEAD MAN LAUGHS

IT WAS characteristic of Ironsides to make an entry of that sort. Finding Higham Top in darkness, except for a dim light in the hall and bright lights streaming out of the library window, the chief inspector had made a bee line for the latter.

"No need to disturb the servants," he muttered mischievously. "Let's go this way. H'm! If this Parsloe blighter is a murderer—and I'm not making any more guesses on that score—he's damned careless with his window blinds."

"Well, he's hardly likely to be committing another murder in his own library," murmured Johnny Lister. "I don't suppose they ever pull the blinds in this house. Why should they? They're miles from the road and screened by trees..."

"Please, Sergeant Lister," broke in Inspector Catchpole, the third member of the little party. "The blinds aren't important... I'm worried. I don't like this sort of thing at all, Mr. Cromwell."

"What sort of thing?"

"You know very well what I mean, sir," wheezed the stout inspector. "Not facing Sir Philip and getting the truth out of him.... That's all right. We've got to do that as a matter of duty. But the other... It's damned risky, sir. If anything goes wrong I shall lose my pension...."

"I might lose mine, but yours is safe enough," growled Ironsides partly. "Didn't I make it clear to Sergeant Root,

before we left the police station, that I'm shouldering the entire responsibility? Then don't moan so much. I'll admit I'm taking a risk, but a man never gets anywhere unless he gambles now and again."

There was no time for further conversation. They had reached the window, and Cromwell stepped forward until he was close to the glass, and took a good look inside. Sir Philip Parsloe was looking very serious and grim, and he was talking to Dr. Trumper, who was looking very pale and groggy.

It was at this moment that the doctor saw the figure at the window. Ironsides gave a little grunt as he observed the abrupt change in Parsloe's manner.

"Is it all right, Sir Philip?" he called, in the friendliest of terms. "Can I come in?"

"Certainly," replied Sir Philip readily. "One moment. I'll open the window."

As he advanced towards the french door he could not conceal the light of evil satisfaction which burned in his eyes. No need to go searching for Cromwell now . . . Cromwell was walking right in. . . . And, because he had come to the library window, instead of going to the door, nobody in the house knew anything about his presence.

"Come in, Cromwell—come in!" invited Parsloe cordially.

The chief inspector smiled to himself as the french door was opened. Try as he would to control himself, there was a distinct suggestion of "walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly" in Sir Philip's voice and manner.

"Didn't like to disturb the household at this late hour, sir," said Ironsides. "Saw a light in this window, so we came this way."

Parsloe's manner underwent a sudden change. For the first time he saw two other figures in the background—the stout bulk of Inspector Catchpole, and the lithe slimness of Detective Sergeant Lister.

"I see. You're a very careful man, Mr. Cromwell," said Sir Philip curtly. "Come in—all of you. This is a strange hour to be calling on me, isn't it?"

Cromwell did not answer immediately. He waited until his two companions were in the room. Then, after a glance at the agitated Dr. Trumper, he turned to his host.

"I'm calling on a strange business, Sir Philip," he answered. "I wonder if you would be surprised if I arrested you, here and now, for the attempted murder of Sergeant Lister and myself at about ten-thirty this evening?"

It was such an unexpected speech that Sir Philip Parsloe was momentarily thrown off his balance. Dr. Trumper nearly collapsed; he made unhappy little noises and seemed to go into a trance, with his eyes fixed on Cromwell.

"I don't know whether you're trying to be funny or not, Cromwell, but I'm not in the mood for jokes at this hour," said Parsloe with annoyance. "What, exactly, do you mean by that extraordinary remark?"

"Don't you know?" mocked the chief inspector. "Somehow, I think you do, sir, but don't worry. . . ."

"What the devil do you mean—don't worry?" snapped the other. "You have a fine nerve, coming in here. . . ."

"I'm not going to charge you with anything—yet," proceeded Cromwell imperturbably. "Before we get to that—if we ever do get to it—somebody in this room has got to do a whole lot of talking."

"Yes, yes—exactly," said Trumper, half jerking himself out of his chair. "Cromwell is right, Parsloe. There's no sense in further subterfuge. . . ."

"Be quiet," snapped Parsloe. "Cromwell has no authority. If he had, he would have produced it at once. But he's clever enough to know that a little chicanery of this sort will make you lose your head and say foolish things. . . ."

"But, Parsloe," panted the doctor. "It's absolutely useless to keep up this nonsense. . . ."

"I agree, sir," interrupted Inspector Catchpole, striding forward with grim authority—and determined to assert himself for once, Cromwell or no Cromwell. "Sir Philip Parsloe, I want a full statement from you concerning the murder of your brother, Sir Kenneth Parsloe."

A fleeting expression of annoyance passed across Bill Cromwell's face. This was an entirely unrehearsed scene, and he hated to see a colleague making a fool of himself. Dr. Trumper fell back into his chair again, pale and shaking.

"I thought you were an incompetent idiot the first time I set eyes on you, Catchpole," said Parsloe contemptuously. "Now you have confirmed that impression. You call it murder, do you? My poor brother was accidentally killed. . . . Perhaps you even go so far as to suggest that it was I who murdered him."

"I didn't say that, sir."

"But you implied it."

"No, I didn't, sir. I only said that I want a statement,"

said Catchpole obstinately. "And the sooner you let me have it, the better."

"I believe," said Parsloe, "that my brother was on quite friendly terms with your chief constable, Catchpole. To-morrow I shall make a point of going to see him. I'll have you thrown out of the Force . . ."

"Before we start talking of throwing people out of Forces, sir, wouldn't it be a good idea to get things straight?" interrupted Ironsides, in a tired voice. "Better leave this to me, inspector," he added, with a regretful glance at Catchpole. "I don't see how any man can give you a statement about a murder that was never committed. I know damned well you can't charge a man with murdering himself."

"Doing what, sir?" asked Catchpole blankly.

He jerked round as Dr. Trumper sprang to his feet—as though Cromwell's words had touched off a bomb.

"He knows, Parsloe," shouted the doctor. "You heard that, didn't you? I'm glad. I've had enough. Far better for the truth to come out at once."

"A bit late, aren't you?" jerked Cromwell. "I'm doing the talking now, doctor. It would have been different if you had made up your mind to talk first." He swung round on the baronet. "I'm afraid your little game is up, Sir Kenneth."

There was a silence that almost hurt.

"Sir—what?" wheezed Catchpole, at length.

"You heard. I can't understand why you haven't seen it yourself, long ago. I gave you a hint—two or three hints. The body upstairs isn't that of Sir Kenneth Parsloe, but the body of Simon Biggintree, who died last April in Topley Down while he was dipping sheep."

"Biggintree . . . last April . . . Have you gone out of your head, Mr. Cromwell?" ejaculated Catchpole, aghast. "Sir Kenneth Parsloe is dead, and this gentleman . . ."

"This gentleman," said Cromwell, "is Sir Kenneth Parsloe himself—second edition, as it were. The shaggy, untidily dressed Sir Kenneth—minus beard and whiskers, and dressed in correct evening clothes. Incidentally, he's been laughing at us for two days. . . ." The chief inspector smiled twistedly.

"Rather a unique thought, that—a dead man laughing." Except for a few wheezy noises, deep in his throat, Catchpole suppressed his emotion well. It was as though a flood of dazzling light had flashed into the darkness of his brain. Johnny Lister was in very much the same condition. Now that

the thing had been revealed to him, he was amazed to find that it had been glowing like a beacon all the time.

"Kick me, somebody!" muttered the sergeant. "I'll tell you what, Mr. Catchpole; you kick me, and I'll kick you. We've both been as blind as bats. We ought to have known as soon as we found the empty coffin."

Dr. Trumper was reacting in quite a different way. In the space of ten seconds he was a changed man. As he rose to his feet the panic died out of his eyes, and spots of colour returned to his cheeks. A great relief surged over him, visible for all to see, and when he spoke his voice was eager and virile.

"God, I'm glad!" he said fervently. "This terrible nightmare has been almost more than I could bear. Don't take any notice of Parsloe—he's been drinking. He's not in a fit state to talk. He's been drinking heavily. But you can't hold anything criminal against him, Mr. Cromwell."

"No?"

"No, you can't," insisted the doctor. "Or me, either. We have been foolish, I'll admit—madly, preposterously foolish. But we've done nothing criminal."

The man who was now revealed as Sir Kenneth Parsloe laughed amusedly.

"Quite a pretty little comedy, eh, Mr. Cromwell?" he said, sitting down and lighting a cigarette. "I'm afraid I'm not so philosophical as my friend, the doctor. I'm very sorry the truth has come out. I was looking forward to an enjoyable time, playing this comedy through to the finish. There's nothing you can do, of course. . . ."

"You didn't try to kill us in that cold storage plant, did you?" said Johnny Lister sharply.

"What cold storage plant is this?" wondered Sir Kenneth, with lifted eyebrows.

Catchpole turned to Cromwell for guidance.

"Are you going through with that charge, sir?" he asked.

"I never made such a charge," replied Ironsides. "I'm afraid there's not enough evidence. . . ."

"What about another charge?" asked Parsloe mockingly.

"Why not arrest me for murdering Simon Biggintree? But I advise you to be careful, Cromwell. I seem to remember that Biggintree died nearly a year ago. . . ."

"Here, that's right!" interrupted Catchpole, with a jump.

"There's something wrong. . . . If this man died last April, Mr. Cromwell, how can he be upstairs? After all this time a dead body would be. . . . well. . . ."

"Hardly in a fit condition to be mistaken for a man who died two nights ago, eh?" supplied Ironsides grimly. "You're right, inspector. But cold mutton, killed in the Argentine, wouldn't be much good for Sunday's dinner in England if it wasn't preserved on its way across the Atlantic. Modern science has achieved some pretty wonderful things . . ."

"That cold storage plant of the doctor's!" shouted Catchpole, with a full and complete understanding. "Now I know why you told me that there was something funny about the dead man, when we first found him. You said he was too cold—too stiff . . . Here, what's been going on? Body snatching, by God! It seems to me, Sir Kenneth Parsloe, that we shall have a very serious charge to bring against you. . . ."

"Nonsense. We've done no harm to anybody," interrupted Parsloe curtly.

"There may not have been any murder—or any accidental death, if it comes to that," snapped Catchpole. "But robbing a grave is a serious charge, and I don't know what to say about your other hanky-panky tricks. I wonder what poor old Biggintree's relatives would say if they knew . . .?"

"They didn't know—and they were not intended to know," said Sir Kenneth, with a shrug. "Where ignorance is bliss, Inspector . . . No, I don't see that we have harmed anybody. I can give you a perfectly straightforward explanation, and if I've transgressed the law in any way I dare say a fine will meet the case. Let's be sensible about this. Admittedly, I played a trick on the police—but it was never intended to be a criminal trick. Trumper and I talked the whole thing over months ago. . . . What I did, I did for my own protection. I thought it was an exceedingly ingenious idea—and, indeed, but for your presence on the scene, Cromwell, there would have been none of this trouble."

"Protection against young Maurice Hatherton, I presume?" asked Ironsides bluntly.

"Of course. The man is dangerous," retorted Parsloe. "If he had gone to the gallows, all would have been well. He should have gone to the gallows. He's a killer. He killed poor Easton, my partner—and then threatened to kill me. You know as well as I do that those threats were not empty. The very fact that Hatherton escaped from prison and was actually in this village a couple of nights ago, is a clear proof that my precautions were necessary—and justified."

"I don't think Hatherton ever threatened to kill you, Sir Kenneth," said Cromwell, with dangerous silkiness in his voice.

"He wanted to get to you—to meet you face to face—but I don't think it's on record that he said he'd kill you. I wonder if you'll be surprised to know that I twigged your game *before* you arrived on the scene as 'Sir Philip'? My private examination of the body was very informative."

"You hear, Parsloe?" asked Dr. Trumper shrilly. "He examined the body. I knew it!"

"I felt a bit sorry for you, doctor," said Cromwell dryly. "You did all you could to stop me, didn't you? That was one reason why I wanted to have a closer look. . . . All I had to do was to pick a door lock, and I spent a most interesting hour with our friend, Biggintree. You see, a thought had come to me. . . . Before Inspector Catchpole and I had even got to Higham Top—while we were driving along in the car—the inspector happened to mention that Sir Kenneth Parsloe and old Simon Biggintree were known as the two most bearded men in all Surrey. That brought something back to my mind—a photograph in a cheap Sunday paper, some years ago, of a Surrey farmer, and some tosh to the effect that he was somebody's 'double.' You know what these Sunday papers are. It was all nonsense, really. Except for the fact that the two men had the same kind of beards, they weren't at all alike."

"True—perfectly true," said the doctor eagerly. "In spite of that, a sort of fable grew up, and was spread through the villages, that Sir Kenneth and Biggintree were as like as two peas. As you say, it was nonsense. You know how these stories are exaggerated. . . . One day, years ago, I believe a farmer friend of Biggintree's hailed Sir Kenneth from across the road in Redhill—and Sir Kenneth was rather annoyed. When Biggintree heard about it, he turned it into a great joke—he was a boisterous, jovial kind of man—and I believe he even went to the length of trimming his beard a bit so that it more closely resembled Sir Kenneth's."

"The thing became a damned nuisance," said Sir Kenneth irritably. "If I ever happened to go near Topley Down, country louts laughed at me outright. I understand that many of Biggintree's acquaintances, at cattle markets and agricultural shows, got in the way of greeting him as 'Sir Kenneth,' and laughing uproariously. I was glad when the man died."

"Of heart failure," nodded Bill Cromwell.

"Of heart failure—and I defy you to prove anything else," snapped Sir Kenneth. "The body's upstairs—go and look at it."

"Thanks, sir, but I've looked at it," drawled Ironsides.

"And one thing I noticed, after I had made a careful examination of the fingernails, was that the dead man had been leading a rough life. His hands were hard and horny—the typical hands of a farmer. I took specimens, too, of the deposit under the fingernails—just to be on the safe side, you see—and our people at the Yard got busy with microscopes. They found distinct traces of carbolic acid crystals and soft soap. In a word, sheep dip. Very conclusive evidence that the body belonged to Simon Biggintree, and not to Sir Kenneth Parsloe, who was hardly likely to have been dipping sheep in his library. But that evidence, in itself, wasn't enough. Dr. Trumper's behaviour had interested me from the first, and when I found out that he had a private cold storage plant of his own I was mightily intrigued. There were two things I had to do before I could come out into the open. One was to take a look at the cold storage plant, and the other was to open Simon Biggintree's grave. I had a hell of a job convincing the Home Secretary, but I got an exhumation order out of him before I left London."

"Why couldn't I have seen that before?" grumbled Catchpole. "Biggintree's body, of course, was preserved in Dr. Trumper's refrigerator. It's an ugly business . . ."

"No inspector, not at all," said Trumper quickly. "Sir Kenneth and I acted from the first with the best of motives. We had no intention of harming a living soul. Indeed, the inception of the idea came from me. Sir Kenneth was all against it at first."

"Go on, doctor," said Ironsides. "You're taking all this down, Johnny, aren't you? Good."

"You will understand, Mr. Cromwell, that as Sir Kenneth's closest friend—indeed, his only intimate friend—I was well aware of his trouble over that unfortunate Easton murder case, and the threats of that young devil, Hatherton," continued Trumper. "In just the same way, I knew all about the preposterous and unpleasant joke concerning Biggintree. It was when I heard of Biggintree's sudden death that an idea came to me—particularly as the unhappy man had died of heart failure, which meant that his appearance was quite normal. I had been experimenting with various animals in my preserving chamber, and I had met with great success. I knew that I could preserve Biggintree's body in perfect safety, and in perfect condition, for years if necessary. How easy to keep it in cold store until a reasonable amount of time had passed, and then produce it as the body of Sir Kenneth."

"Sounds plain crazy to me," grunted Catchpole.

"Oh, no, it was decidedly ingenious," insisted the doctor. "If everything had gone as we had originally planned there would have been no suspicion in anybody's mind; no trouble of any sort. Luck was against us, that's all. It was most unfortunate that Hatherton should escape from prison this week—for that was not only a serious complication in itself, but it had the effect of bringing you on the scene, Mr. Cromwell. But for these totally unlooked-for developments, there would never have been any query about the cause of Sir Kenneth's 'death.' There would have been no suggestion of foul play—no hint that Hatherton had committed a second murder."

"Yes, I get that," agreed Cromwell, nodding. "If I hadn't been on the spot, the inspector wouldn't have been there, either. Sergeant Root, perhaps . . . but I've no doubt that you had Sergeant Root in your pockets. No aspersion on Root's character, mark you, but a country policeman is apt to hold the Squire in something akin to awe. The body would have been 'discovered' and carried into this house without any fuss. Nobody would have looked at it closely—except the family doctor."

"Precisely," said Trumper excitedly. "That was the whole essence of the scheme. I was Parsloe's doctor. Nobody else would have had a chance of examining his supposed body. A perfectly simple matter to give the certificate, and not a single awkward question would have been asked. Sir Kenneth Parsloe was dead—unhappily killed in a motoring accident."

"What really happened that night?" asked Ironsides.

"I had better go back a little," said the doctor, before Sir Kenneth could intervene, as he seemed inclined. "No, Parsloe, let me tell the whole story. Ever since poor Warner Easton was murdered Sir Kenneth has been ill with worry. . . . Nerves, sleepless nights, even physical deterioration. . . . As his medical man I was seriously concerned. I knew the cause of the trouble, but could do nothing about it. Parsloe was living in constant dread of Hatherton escaping from prison and coming to Higham Top to attack him. After Hatherton's abortive attempts to escape—which were widely publicised by the newspaper. —I was afraid that I was going to have a really sick man on my hands. At the time of Biggintree's death Sir Kenneth was little better than a nervous wreck.

"And then, like a flash, I had this idea. I talked it over with Sir Kenneth. If we were going to do anything about it,

we had to act immediately after the funeral. We were having a cold spell last April, so I had no fear that the body would have suffered any great deterioration by the time it was buried. . . . All we had to do, I told Parsloe, was to go to Topley Down churchyard on the night of Biggintree's funeral and take the body."

"Ghouls!" muttered Catchpole austerely.

"It was not a pleasant task, I will admit—but to a medical man like myself it was simple enough," said Trumper impatiently. "Everything was in favour of such a plan. Topley Down churchyard is one of the most secluded in this district, without a house or a cottage nearer than half a mile; the churchyard is surrounded by trees and there is a little lane up which I could drive my car. And at that particular period—the time of the funeral, I mean—there was a moon. We need not even take a lantern or electric torches with us. . . . The earth of a freshly closed grave is soft and easy. . . .

"Well, Parsloe decided to risk it. We went to the churchyard on the night of the funeral and removed the earth from the grave. We opened the coffin and took the body out. . . . The next day anybody visiting the grave could have noticed no difference. There was no indication that the earth had been disturbed. By that time Biggintree's body was in my cold storage plant. It remained there, in perfect condition, until the other night."

"You waited a long time," grunted Catchpole.

"For two reasons," said Trumper. "First, because we thought it better to choose a bitter cold period, with the roads gripped by hard frost. We thus had a ready-made explanation of the crash into the ditch—a skid on icy roads—and a ready-made explanation of the body's cold condition. Secondly, we wanted a long interval to elapse, so that Biggintree would be decently forgotten."

"Ingenious, all right," agreed Cromwell, almost admiringly. "It seems a pity that I butted in and made such a mess of things. But weren't you taking an awful chance, Sir Kenneth, in reappearing at your own house, in front of your own servants, as your own brother?" He looked at Parsloe hard.

"By the way, where is Brother Philip?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IRONSIDES' LONG SHOT

PARSLOE smiled mockingly and shook his head.

"It's no good your looking at me that way, Cromwell," he said. "I didn't kill my brother, if that's what you're thinking. Philip died in an obscure Spanish village, while on a walking tour through the country, nearly four years ago."

"I shall expect to see documentary evidence of that, sir, later on," said Bill Cromwell. "I'm not surprised to hear it, though. I hardly expected you'd engage on an enterprise like this if your brother were really alive. Let's get back to what we were talking about before. Weren't you afraid that your servants would see through you? And Dinglewell . . . What about him? He knows you intimately. . . ."

"Dinglewell!" echoed Sir Kenneth contemptuously. "As short-sighted as a bat. No, I wasn't afraid of Dinglewell. As for the servants, I knew that my appearance would be so altered by the removal of my beard, that I should have no difficulty in fooling them. Any likeness—even a striking likeness—would be regarded as perfectly natural. Philip himself did not come near this house in many years, and none of the servants ever saw him. I changed my voice slightly, too—to say nothing of changing my manner very drastically."

"It would have been hard, keeping that up . . ."

"It wouldn't have been necessary to keep it up for long," said Parsloe. "By the way, doctor, I hope you won't forget to tell Mr. Cromwell of our little financial arrangement. You were getting exceedingly well paid for your services."

"That is perfectly true," agreed Trumper, with dignity. "But I was risking my reputation as a medical man, and I considered that I had a right to a substantial monetary reward. Listen, Mr. Cromwell," he added tensely. "Some years ago I had great and ambitious ideas of settling down to scientific research—of making experiments which would ultimately be of great benefit to mankind. Foolishly, I expended all my available capital on my laboratory and cold storage plant. I'm afraid I'm a very poor business man, and when it was too late I found that I had no money left on which to live. I was obliged, therefore, to earn my living as a country

practitioner. . . . I saw, in this project, a way in which I could realise my dream. Parsloe promised me twenty-five thousand pounds—presumably a legacy in his will. That money would have come to me after the will had been proved—and I should then have been able to abandon my medical practice and devote my time to the work I love.”

“I’m damned sorry for you, doctor,” said Ironsides, and he meant it. “You’re the one who’s going to come out of this business pretty badly. You’ll probably be wiped off the medical register for infamous conduct, and you won’t have your twenty-five thousand pounds as a consolation.”

The unfortunate doctor bowed his head.

“Well, I’m getting what I deserve, I suppose,” he muttered. “But let me finish, please. . . . After we had conveyed the body to my specimen chamber we had to build up a fiction concerning Philip. Philip was dead, but Sir Kenneth had never told anybody about it except me. . . . They had never been on good terms, and had not seen one another in many years. It was essential that Philip should come into the picture as a living man. So, casually at first, Parsloe began telling Dinglewell and various other people that his brother had turned over a new leaf—that the old wound was healed. He made a pretence of receiving letters from Philip, and writing letters in return. This went on for some months. For a very long time Parsloe was engaged in building up the fiction that he and Philip were reconciled, and that Philip was a fine fellow. . . .”

“I can understand all that, sir,” intercepted Catchpole, with a trace of impatience. “But why go to all this jiggery-pokery trouble? You can’t mean to say that young Hather-ton’s threats were enough to set you off on such a dangerous game?”

“I think I have told you that Sir Kenneth was a nervous wreck,” replied Dr. Trumper. “Don’t look at him now; the prospect of freeing himself from the perpetual menace has resulted in an incredible improvement; during these last months he had eaten well, slept well, and his general health is now excellent. But his health at the time we conceived this plan was giving me great concern. He was a man with an obsession; he went about in fear of his life; when he heard of Hather-ton’s first attempt to escape he nearly had a breakdown. . . .”

“There is no need, Trumper,” said Parsloe frowningly, “to exaggerate. Anybody might think I was frightened.”

"I am not exaggerating—and you were frightened," retorted the doctor. "You didn't realise it yourself, perhaps, but I had no difficulty in recognising the symptoms. Can't you understand the real, the subtle, object of our plan, Mr. Cromwell? Sir Kenneth was to die in a car crash—just another commonplace road accident. There would be reports in the papers, and sooner or later Hatherton would get to know—even in prison. You can imagine his reaction on hearing of the accident. All he was living for was to escape—so that he could get at Parsloe. But with Parsloe dead his incentive to escape would die, too."

"Yes," agreed Cromwell. "Very true."

"That was the essence of the whole scheme—to give Hatherton the impression that the man he hated was dead. Even if he did escape, which was most unlikely, he could have no possible grudge against Sir *Philip* Parsloe."

"It seems to me," remarked Inspector Catchpole, "that you were ready to do some pretty dangerous things, and change your whole mode of life, for a small enough reason, sir."

Cromwell nodded approvingly, and Dr. Trumper, after looking at them for a moment, proceeded.

"We had everything arranged. Parsloe was to arrive at this house as Sir Philip . . . It was so easy. Freed of all possible danger, he would carry on here living in peace and safety. As for myself, I was to be twenty-five thousand pounds the richer—free to conduct my scientific researches. That's the whole truth of it, Mr. Cromwell. A simple plan in its essence, with nobody coming to any harm. It was only necessary for Parsloe to be careful for the first few weeks—and if he drifted back into some of his own old habits it would not matter. He has always been a man to keep to himself, and he would still be in his own home, enjoying his own home comforts."

"I quite understand, of course, that a socially inclined man, with his house always full of guests, would have had some difficulty in putting this thing across," agreed Ironsides. "As you say, in this case it was simple. But how was the plan actually put into operation? On the fatal night, I mean?"

"In the first place, I made it known to my household—and Sir Kenneth made it known to his people, here—that I was going to conduct an interesting experiment in my laboratory that evening. Parsloe was to come over to help. The roads were in just the right condition—frosty and treacherous. For

some months Parsloe had been driving about in an open car, saying that he liked an open car better than a saloon. Thus, when he used an open car on that night, it was considered to be quite normal. The only thing that took us by surprise was the snow. We wanted a hard frost, but not snow."

"But what about the body?"

"It was already in the car—having been brought here from my cold storage plant the previous night. With the temperature well below freezing point it was a safe procedure."

"You call it safe—driving a dead body about?"

"It was a risk we had to take—and a very small risk at that," replied the doctor. "Parsloe called on me, as he often did, and we put the body in the back of the car and covered it with rugs. Parsloe drove back home and put the car in the small garage. It is quite a separate garage from the main garage, over which Edwards sleeps. For over six months Sir Kenneth had kept it locked, with the key in his own pocket. It had come to be a recognised thing that he always kept the small garage locked."

"Every detail allowed for, eh?" said Cromwell. "You were pretty thorough, I must say."

"We had to be thorough," replied the doctor. "I might add that Biggintree's body was already dressed in a replica of Sir Kenneth's own distinctive suit, with an identical muffler. Parsloe had worn the two suits alternately so that they wore evenly. I need hardly say that he has no valet, and he keeps his wardrobe locked."

"Yes, I was wondering about the clothes," said Cromwell. "Having two suits, exactly alike, was clever. The body had to be found looking exactly the same as Sir Kenneth when he left the house . . . and there would certainly not have been time to mess about, changing clothes with a corpse, at the time of the supposed accident."

"Precisely," said Trumper. "Well, Parsloe started off at the time arranged. Just before starting, however, he had a talk with Beale and made some pointed references to the warm nature of the suit he was wearing—just another little precaution, so that when the dead man was carried in, Beale would automatically accept it as that of his master. Parsloe went to the garage in the ordinary way, took out the car, and drove towards Lower Martin."

"And then," said Parsloe bitterly, "it started snowing. In fact, it had started rather before that. A hell of a nuisance. . . . I had to get away from the wrecked car without leaving

any trace—and on a bicycle. When I saw the snow coming down, I almost abandoned the whole project."

"One moment," said Cromwell. "Biggintree died of heart failure. How did he get that skull injury?"

"The skull injury was effected by me," replied the doctor. "It had to be done in order to give the impression that Sir Kenneth had died by striking his head violently against the frozen ditch. Well, the plan went quite smoothly . . . Parsloe staged the skid with complete success; then he heaved the body out of the car and left it lying in the ditch, as though flung out by the force of the impact. He took the bicycle which was concealed in the back and rode away."

"Not a particularly easy thing to do," said Parsloe, who seemed to be taking a cynical interest in the recital. "That snow was the devil. If I left cycle tracks on the road the whole jig would have been up. My only recourse was to ride *within* one of the car tracks. It took some doing, believe me. I kept it up for nearly a mile—and then, at a spot where some cattle had been crossing the road, I was able to relax. There was a farm track just there, and it was this farm track I needed. I went along it to a deserted barn—on my own property, by the way—and here I had everything ready. I changed my clothes, burning the suit which was identical with the clothes on the body. I cut off my beard and shaved, and when everything was ready I simply cycled into Guildford by a long, roundabout route and took a train for London. I abandoned the bicycle in a pond outside the town. I put up at the Dorchester in the name of 'Philip Parsloe,' saying that I had just arrived from the continent. The next day I saw the newspapers and immediately wired Dinglewell."

"And that, gentlemen, is the full story," said Dr. Trumper, his shoulders drooping. "What you are going to do with us I cannot imagine—but I would like to assure you that we never had any criminal intention."

"Unless you call robbing a graveyard criminal intention," said Catchpole sternly. "Of course, Mr. Cromwell, you had a hunch that something like this had been going on, hadn't you? If you hadn't, you wouldn't have gone to the Home Office, asking for an order to exhume Biggintree's body."

"Congratulations, Cromwell," said Sir Kenneth, yawning. "Accept my apologies for ever having looked upon you as a fool. It seems that you were one jump ahead of us all the time."

"No, sir—just one jump behind," replied Ironsides. "Otherwise, we should have had this little chat two days ago. I had a hunch, yes—but hunches aren't much good as evidence. Before I could take any action, I had to make sure that Dr. Trumper's reputed refrigerator *was* a refrigerator—and one capable of keeping a dead body in perfect condition for months on end. I also had to make sure that Biggintree's coffin was empty. Why, dammit," he said impatiently, "the doctor, here, gave himself away practically from the start. I daresay you're a clever doctor, Trumper, but you're a hell of a bad actor. The way you kept telling me that Sir Kenneth's death was accidental was a sure proof that something fishy was going on. The whole thing smelled."

"It was your unexpected appearance on the scene—you, a highly placed Scotland Yard officer—which frightened me," admitted the doctor. "Again, your information that Hather-ton had escaped from prison and was somewhere in the district—that frightened me, too. Everything was going wrong. I was deadly scared lest your investigations should point to the supposed Philip as the murderer—assuming that you rejected the accident theory. In any such event as that, of course, we should have been compelled to come out with the truth, and our whole scheme would have collapsed."

"If you ask me, Mr. Cromwell, this case has fizzled out like a damp squib," said Catchpole discontentedly. "There hasn't been any murder—there's no murderer—and I'm not sure what charge we can bring against Sir Kenneth and the doctor."

"Better go back and look up your books," suggested Sir Kenneth cynically. "You can charge us with digging up Biggintree's body, yes. Was that actually a criminal act? We haven't sold the body; we haven't used it for criminal purposes. How does it strike you, Cromwell?"

Bill Cromwell rose to his feet.

"There's one thing that seems to me damned suggestive—not to say ugly," he said, looking straight at Parsloe from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. "It's something that Dr. Trumper hasn't seen in all these months."

"Meaning what, sir?" asked the doctor.

"Everything I've heard to-night—and everything that has happened during the past day or two—points to one overwhelmingly significant conclusion," said Ironsides, his voice somehow gaining strength and power. "Why were you so

afraid of Maurice Hatherton? You knew darned well that his chance of escaping from prison was remote. . . ."

"But," Parsloe pointed out, "he did escape."

"A fluke. One of those thousand-to-one chances that occasionally come off. Actually, you must have known that the possibility was hardly worth bothering about. Yet you are willing to pay Dr. Trumper a small fortune and change your identity for the mere hoodwinking of a man who wasn't a real danger to you at all."

"Now you are getting tiresome," said Sir Kenneth roughly, taking a great dislike to the chief inspector's stare. "Changing my identity, as you call it, was only a pretence. . . . But I don't see why I should argue with you. I don't like your tone, Cromwell."

"You'll like it still less in a minute," said Ironsides grimly. "You'll hate it. How many times have I heard, during the last hour, that you were afraid of Hatherton because he had uttered murderous threats against you; because his one aim, after escaping the gallows, was to break gaol and 'get' you? Gross misstatements, every one of them. Maurice Hatherton never threatened you; he never swore to 'get' you. . . ."

"Surely you are mistaken, Mr. Cromwell?" broke in Dr. Trumper, in astonishment. "I have always understood that Hatherton was a vicious young devil with murder in his heart."

"A picture supplied to you by Sir Kenneth Parsloe," retorted Cromwell. "I know why you were so keen to 'die,' Parsloe, and get beyond Hatherton's reach; why you were afraid that he would break gaol and confront you. Notice I say 'confront you' and not 'kill you' . . . You knew he wouldn't kill you, but you were terrified lest he should get you face to face and force a confession out of you. . . . Happily, the need for that has now passed. . . ."

"Are you completely mad, Cromwell?" shouted Parsloe, white with rage. "Force a confession out of me? What confession?"

"You sent an innocent man to the gallows by giving false testimony against him," said Ironsides deliberately. "It was your rotten conscience and your fear of retribution—when you found that Hatherton had been reprieved—that drove you into a nervous breakdown. Hatherton was a happy, carefree youngster, and suddenly his life was shattered." Cromwell's voice became hard and brittle. "He knew that you were the cause of his downfall. You expected him to hang; but he

didn't hang; he lived and still lives. . . . And now, we come to the point where I'm going to make a charge."

There was a tense, electric feeling in the air. Catchpole was looking almost frightened; Dr. Trumper sat hunched and still, his eyes fixed on Cromwell as though he were hypnotised; Johnny Lister made a slight movement in Parsloe's direction, and his muscles were tensed, ready for instant action; Parsloe himself, his drink-inflamed eyes wild, his face flushed, had the appearance of a trapped rat.

"I've been waiting until I heard the details of your little plot," continued Cromwell. "I was afraid I might not get those details so easily afterwards. Sir Kenneth Parsloe, it is my duty to arrest you . . ."

He paused, frowning, for at that moment there was a dramatic and unexpected interruption. A tap sounded on the door, and when Parsloe sharply said "come in," Beale entered, looking as sedate and unruffled as ever.

"A gentleman to see Mr. Cromwell," said Beale stolidly.

"What in the name of . . ." began Parsloe.

He stopped. A tall, athletic figure came striding eagerly into the room, his eyes shining with excitement; he was neatly dressed, his fresh face was clean-shaven, and he walked as though on springs.

"Sorry to butt in, Mr. Cromwell," he said breathlessly.

"They told me you were up here. . . . I couldn't wait. I had to come up and thank you. . . ."

"Hatherton!" interrupted Sir Kenneth Parsloe, his voice rising as he recognised the newcomer—and became aware of the obvious and dumbfounding fact that he was a free man. "What in God's name is Hatherton doing here? Why isn't he in custody?"

"Oh, that's something I haven't told you yet," replied Cromwell. "Hatherton's a free man; he was released to-day. The game's up, Parsloe. It is my duty to arrest you on the charge of murdering Warner Hope Easton, on the evening of . . ."

Sir Kenneth sprang back so suddenly that he sent a chair crashing over. His bloodshot eyes were full of hatred and fear.

"You tricky swine, Cromwell . . ."

"I hope you're not going to make things difficult," continued Ironsides, with a sigh. "I've managed to get hold of new evidence and it'll be a lot better for all concerned, Parsloe, if you act sensibly and take in on the chin."

The air of quiet confidence in Cromwell's tone, supple-

mented by the fact that Maurice Hatherton had been given his liberty, plus a brain which was inflamed by drink, caused the baronet to betray himself.

"You're a cunning devil, Cromwell, but you're not going to get me as easily as all that," he said, whipping open a drawer of the desk and pulling out a small automatic. "You'll never get me to the gallows. . . ."

"Stop him, Johnny!" yelled Cromwell.

Johnny Lister was just too late. Even while his fingers were closing round Parsloe's arm, the frantic man pulled the trigger—and the bullet entered the side of his head. . . . Blood spurted hideously as the man sank in a writhing heap.

"My God!" said Ironsides, horrified.

Dr. Trumper, coming out of his trance, fell on his knees beside the stricken man.

"I knew it, sir—I knew it!" almost wailed Catchpole. "I said there would be awful trouble if you persisted. . . ."

"Won't some of you help me to lift him on to the couch?" interrupted Dr. Trumper angrily. "He's dying, I'm afraid. . . . My old friend. . . . He's still conscious, but he cannot last long."

They lifted Sir Kenneth on to the couch, and the change in his expression was startling; he knew he was dying; he knew he had only a few minutes; and all the hatred and panic had drained away, leaving him calm and cynical.

"You win, Cromwell," he muttered. "Got a piece of paper? It's a signed confession you want, isn't it? You were perfectly right—Hatherton is innocent. . . . It was I who killed Warner Easton—damn his eyes for the double-crossing crook he was!"

They managed to get his confession written out, and they got a pen into his failing fingers. . . . they guided his hand as he signed. . . . Contrary to Dr. Trumper's fears, however, he did not immediately lose consciousness. He kept talking for some minutes, and even begged for another glass of whisky and a cigarette. Then, quietly, he passed into a state of coma. . . .

Bill Cromwell, suddenly looking very old and very tired, sank into a chair and swore softly to himself. Johnny Lister, who was feeling shaky on his own account, had never seen Ironsides so completely shaken.

Other things were happening. . . .

The burly Sergeant Root, appearing in the doorway with a startled look on his face, placed himself beside young Hatherton, and took a firm grip on the latter's arm. . . . Inspector

Catchpole was the most worried man in Surrey. . . . Scuffling sounds, accompanied by whispers, came from the hall, announcing that the servants had been aroused by the shot. . . .

"What are we going to do?" muttered Catchpole, looking at Ironsides helplessly. "The man's dead. . . ."

"Not yet," interrupted Dr. Trumper. "It's only a small gun and the bullet is lodged in his head. But he won't last long. An hour or two, perhaps. . . ."

"Couldn't he be rushed to hospital?" asked Catchpole.

"No; he can't be moved."

"It's all right, Mr. Cromwell, isn't it?" asked Hatherton, looking at Ironsides with eager, feverishly hopeful eyes. "You heard what he said. That's evidence, isn't it?"

Cromwell heaved himself out of his chair, shook himself like a shaggy dog, and patted the young man on the shoulder.

"Nothing for you to worry about now, young feller," he said kindly. "Take that ugly great paw of yours off his arm, Root. You don't think he's going to run away, do you?"

Sergeant Root shuffled.

"Prisoner, sir. . . got to be careful. . . ."

"If there's one man in the whole of England who's not likely to do a bunk, it's this young man," said Ironsides impatiently. "Only a matter of a day or two, Hatherton. Perhaps less. You'll have to go back into the jug, of course. Just a formality while the Law, which I know from experience to be an ass, is granting you a free pardon for something you didn't do."

"What about Parsloe, sir?" asked Catchpole, before the half-dazed Hatherton could reply. "He's dead. . . at least, he's dying. . . ."

"For heaven's sake, man, don't keep fluttering about like an old hen," snapped Cromwell. "Sorry, inspector," he apologised instantly. "Still a bit on edge myself. . . . It was suicide. We can all bear testimony to that."

"Yes, it was suicide—definitely," said Dr. Trumper. "Somehow, I think I'm glad. Until to-night I had regarded Parsloe as my friend. . . . It was he who shut you up in my cold storage plant, Cromwell. He told me so himself. . . . Not that it matters now. . . ." The doctor passed a hand over his eyes. "I'm afraid I'm very dull. I don't understand exactly what happened. Isn't Hatherton a free man?"

"Practically," replied Ironsides grimly. "But only because I took a long shot more or less in the dark. . . ." He expelled his breath loudly. "A hell of a long shot, I might tell you. It

takes a good deal to make me sweat, but I sweated like a pig during those few seconds. I suppose I'm nothing better than an old fool," he added roughly. "Strictly speaking, it's none of my business, and there's going to be the devil to pay when I make my report . . ."

"I don't see why you should say that," said Dr. Trumper warmly. "You exposed a murderer and saved an innocent man . . . I swear to you, Cromwell, that I had no idea of Parsloe's guilt in that old Easton murder: . . ."

"I believe you," growled Ironsides. "Listen, doctor. I don't quite know how I'm going to deal with you. If you'll give me your word of honour not to do anything silly I'll place you on parole and let you go home: . . ."

"I cannot go home yet," said the doctor. "I must keep by Parsloe's side until the end. I don't think it will be long. Thank you, Mr. Cromwell. I appreciate your kindness. I readily give you my word of honour."

"I was right," muttered Ironsides, as though talking to himself. "I knew damned well I was right. There was no real evidence against Parsloe. . . . Nothing. I took a big gamble. A man who could shut me up in a cold storage plant to die like a dog was more likely to have killed Warner Easton than a young feller like Hatherton. . . . Parsloe was knocked off his balance to-night, and I saw that it was a golden opportunity to rattle him into a fatal admission. Worked up as he was, there was a chance that I could panic him into spilling the beans—by suddenly springing Hatherton on him, presumably a free man."

"Then you have no new evidence?" asked Trumper.

"Not a thing. But Parsloe didn't know it. When Parsloe saw Hatherton, neatly dressed and freshly shaved, bursting into the room like an eager schoolboy, he naturally assumed that something had sprung a leak. It could only mean that there *was* fresh evidence, and as his own soul was black with the guilt of that Easton killing, he did just what I wanted him to do . . . except pulling out that gun. Perhaps it's the best way, on the whole."

"But you took an awful chance, Mr. Cromwell," said Catchpole, with a shiver.

"What do you mean—I took an awful chance?" snapped Ironsides unreasonably. "I didn't take any chance at all!"

"But I thought you said . . ."

"I released Hatherton from the local jug on my own responsibility," said the chief inspector sourly. "I told you

from the first that it would work out right, didn't I? And what was the risk, anyhow? A fat chance Hatherton would have had of escaping if he had been mug enough to try it—with cops out on the lawn, and Root in the hall. No . . . I had this case all sewn up except for the glaringly obvious suggestion that Parsloe would never have gone to all this trouble unless his conscience had been like a piece of charred

Sir Kenneth rallied just before dawn, and he was then able to give a surprisingly complete statement of the Easton murder. He had killed his partner after a private quarrel, and had done so with premeditated deliberation, after involving the young private secretary in an angry scene with his employer which was known to everybody in the office; he had arranged the killing so cunningly that he had left no trace of his own work. But there had to be a murderer—and Hatherton was the handiest man for the rôle. Unfortunately for Parsloe's devilish scheme, Hatherton had been reprieved, and instead of going to the gallows he had remained a grim menace to Parsloe's peace of mind. . . .

There was a big hullabaloo at Scotland Yard, of course, with Cromwell well and truly on the carpet; but nothing could alter the glaring fact that the end had justified the means. Ironsides methods had been highly irregular, but they had certainly achieved results.

"They nearly had the coat off my back, Johnny—but not quite," said the wily Ironsides, some days later, when he was talking things over with Johnny Lister. "What the devil do they expect me to do? See a murderer go free, and an innocent man sent back to serve twenty years of hell? I *knew* Hatherton had been framed, and I knew Parsloe was guilty. The only thing to do was to give the swine a jolt."

"You did that all right," chuckled the sergeant. "And I must say, Old Iron, that you handled things beautifully. It's a scream, really . . . That old Easton murder had no connection with this Higham Top affair. . . . Any idea what's going to happen to our genial pal, Dr. Trumper?"

"Dr. Trumper is sitting pretty," replied Ironsides. "Sir Kenneth Parsloe is really dead—and he's not laughing now. That last will and testament of his is valid in law, and Trumper comes in for twenty-five thousand of the best. I don't think we're going to press any charges against him. It would be pretty awkward . . . After all, except for helping in that body-



